Rolling Stone UK

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2022
ISSUE 006

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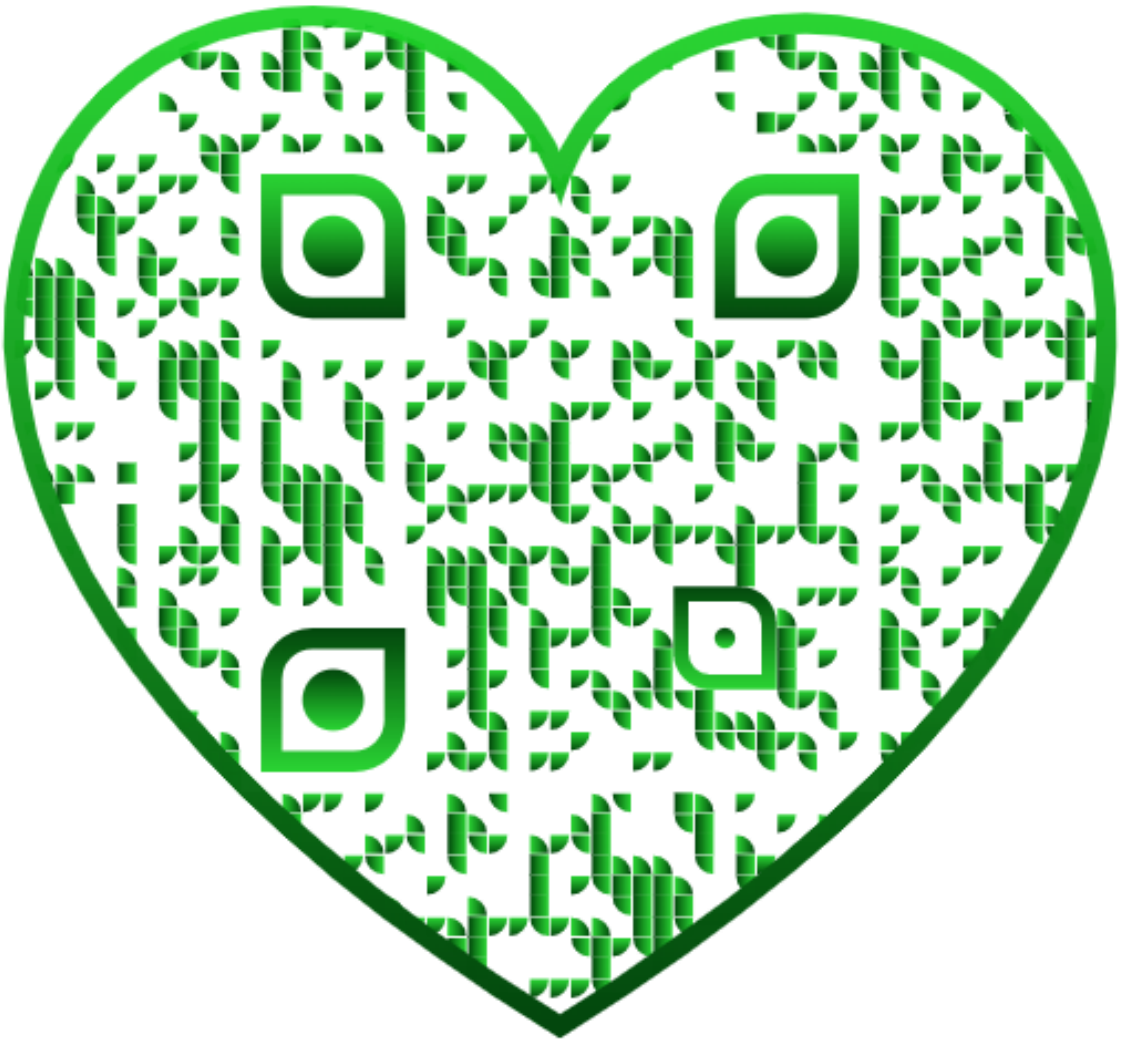
JAMIE T
BLACKPINK
PAOLO NUTINI
BEABADOOBEE
KING PRINCESS
DERMOT KENNEDY
MEGAN THEE STALLION
RINA SAWAYAMA
LAVA LA RUE
JAYDA G
FLO

MATTY HEALY

THE 1975 FRONTMAN WANTS TO KNOW IF TRUE LOVE EXISTS



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RS

ISSUE 006

"I had to go back into talk therapy when I first started getting recognised because of the anxiety of not seeing anyone, almost getting agoraphobia by not leaving the house"

Rina Sawayama

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MARCUS COOPER

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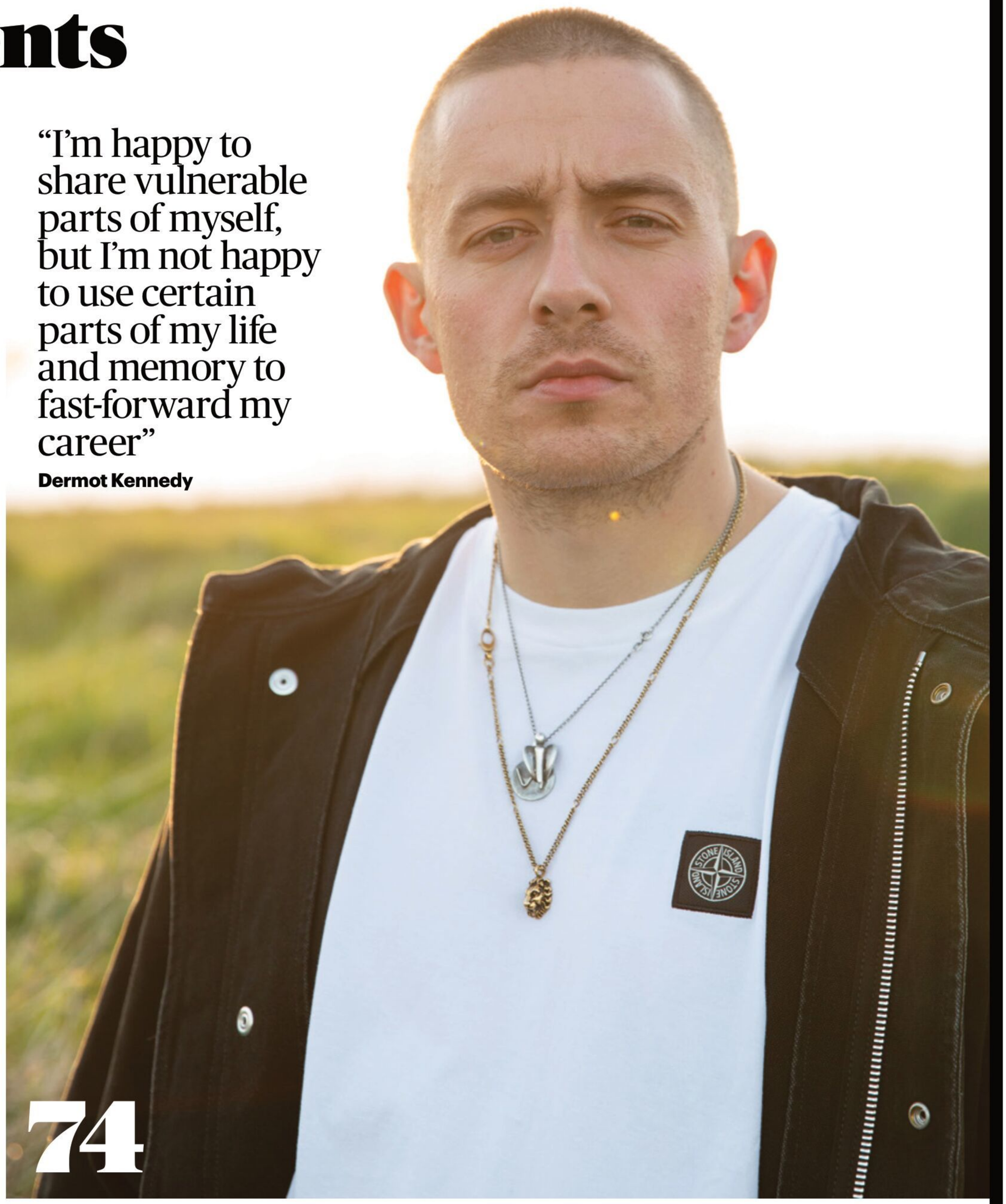

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A curation of the greatest hits.

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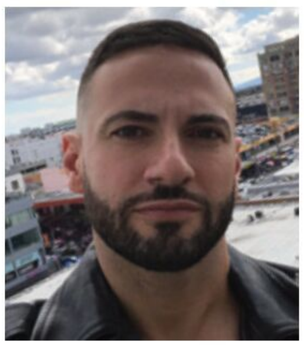
PORSCHE

Editor's Letter

Grassroots music venues need you



BEFORE MOVING INTO publishing, some of my early years in media were spent working at a public relations company that managed some incredible projects, from Notting Hill Carnival to film festivals at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. We also worked with Channelfly group, a series of grassroots music venues that championed emerging talent.

Its Camden outpost, The Barfly, was most notorious as a hub for 90s Britpop bands, while the night Amy Winehouse performed in 2004 is forever etched on my memory. The Barfly expanded across the UK, but then the recession of 2008 hit and its bars, along with numerous other venues, closed. (The Cambridge Barfly is now a JD Wetherspoon pub.)

The Barfly was a small but vital part of the UK's impressive musical legacy. Elsewhere, artists like Cate Le Bon have blessed the stage of The Glad Café, Glasgow, while past visitors to the Ferret in Preston include IDLES and Ed Sheeran. Small-capacity venues are the nucleus of what makes the UK the world's second biggest exporter of music, after the US.

Today, the live music industry faces its greatest crisis ever, spurred on by Brexit, the long shadow of Covid and a spiralling cost of living crisis. In the past 20 years, more than 35 per cent of the UK's grassroots venues have closed. Since the start of the COVID crisis, the sector has acquired over £90m of new debt, yet 67 per cent of the government's Culture Recovery Fund grant aid was paid directly to venues' landlords.

It's why Music Venue Trust (MVT), the UK charity which represents hundreds of grassroots music venues, announced an ambitious new initiative, Music Venue Properties, to help independent venues safeguard their future by owning the properties they occupy. The Own Our Venues scheme aims to "protect, secure and improve grassroots music venues" through a Charitable Community Benefit Society that will purchase the freehold of nine key music venues across the UK.

"Our current landlord has no interest in anything to do with the venue apart from collecting the rent, with no help being offered over the COVID restriction period either," says a spokesperson for Sunbird Records in Darwen, Lancashire.

Developers seeking land for more profitable housing is another issue, says Rachael Flaszczak of The Snug in Atherton, Greater Manchester: "The current landlord wishes to sell the site, which risks it being purchased by people with no interest in the arts and developing the site for residential properties."

For some, the axe could fall tomorrow. "Currently, our rental arrangement is on a rolling month-to-month contract," says Ben Nigh of The Palladium, a 150-capacity venue in Bideford, and the only grassroots music venue in the North Devon area.

The MVT needs your help with its crowdfunding campaign which seeks to raise the funds to secure the future of these crucial performance spaces. "We need to emerge from this crisis with radical plans of how we improve grassroots touring for everyone involved; from artists to audiences, venue operators to crew," says Mark Davyd, CEO of MVT. "We need to create a grassroots venue sector that is resilient, sustainable and economically viable. Own Our Venues is that radical plan. We strongly urge the music community around the world to take a look at the Own Our Venues project and see how they can get involved."

At Rolling Stone UK, we appreciate how vital it is that acts starting out have somewhere to perform and hone their craft. Allow these venues to die out and it is we, as music fans, who will lose out.

To donate, please go to: *crowdfunder.co.uk/p/own-our-venues*

CLIFF JOANNOU
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MATTY WEARS BLAZER BY LOUIS VUITTON

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Jack Chipper
VIDEOGRAPHER

The shoot day started with a buzz of anticipation for what was to come. Witnessing Matty Healy's fascination with a gimbal, which is used to stabilise a camera during filming, was one of the memorable moments from my day. All the little details, styling and props used for the shoot created the opportunity for Matty's personality to shine in the behind-the-scenes video. I found it insightful listening to his interview and hearing what's next for him.

Katie Thomas
WRITER

I first heard Jayda G's 'Both of Us' on the 28th of May 2020. It was the day before my mum died. In the time since, 'Both of Us' has given me more light and more respite than perhaps any other record I have ever heard. I think I was meant to hear it on the day that I did; it was a glimmer of hope as I waited for the most important person in my life to slip away from me forever.

One of the many things I love about writing about music is digging into its ability to heal, and the profound mark it can leave on our hearts, minds and bodies. I think this is why Jayda G and I make a good match; it was an honour to speak to her about her career so far, but I particularly loved getting into the pleasure of dancing with her. "It's such a joyous form," she agreed. "It's how my higher being comes out of me, when I'm my full, light self."

Jordan Rossi
PHOTOGRAPHER

My shoot process is, and has always been, collaborative. It's actually my favourite part about the industry, where I get to create with so many talented individuals on a daily basis.

That was what made shooting Jayda so fun — she totally got what we were trying to achieve. We made these photographs with the incredible team at Rolling Stone UK, and Hector Espinal, chief MUA for Rihanna's Fenty, on makeup. A lot of strong opinions all trying to make the best image possible.

BIFFY CLYRO

UK & IRELAND TOUR

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ARCHITECTS

NOVEMBER 2022

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WED	09	**BELFAST**	SSE ARENA
FRI	11	**BIRMINGHAM**	RESORTS WORLD ARENA
SAT	12	**LONDON**	THE O2
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Search for the Starman

Co-written by David Bowie and Mick Rock in 2002, *Moonage Daydream: The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust* is the definitive document of the fictional character conceived by Bowie that went on to epitomise glam rock. Twenty years on — and marking 50 years since Ziggy's conception — it remains the closest readers will get to understanding Bowie in his own words. Packed with more than 600 photographs and released in a new, uncut, larger format, this compendium offers unprecedented insight into Bowie's most memorable persona.

BOWIEBOOK.COM

MICK ROCK

In the loop

Han Chong, founder and creator of womenswear label self-portrait, has launched the brand's first bag collection, inspired by the 90s. The Bow Bag comes in two styles: choose from the Bow Mini, £350, available in seven colourways; or the Bow Micro, £250, in six different hues. True to their name, both leather bags are adorned with a bow in either hammered gold or sparkling diamanté — as modelled here by one of the era's defining faces, supermodel Naomi Campbell. The icon and 90s legend stars in self-portrait's video campaign, which is set to Brandy and Monica's enduring '98 track, 'The Boy Is Mine'.

SELF-PORTRAIT.COM

RENELL MEDRANO

PICTURE THIS
Chris Stein and Debbie Harry in Philadelphia, 1977

Blondie ambition

The first-ever collection of Blondie's monumental discography is set for release this August. For nearly two decades, the bulk of Blondie's audio and visual archive sat inside Chris Stein's unassuming barn near Woodstock, New York. Reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes and storage tubs crammed with records, flyers and a stray Warhol print have been curated into this ultimate box set, *Blondie: Against the Odds 1974-1982*. Including a previously unheard recording of The Doors' 'Moonlight Drive', it features a treasure trove of 124 tracks (36 previously unissued), plus two volumes of liner notes, track-by-track commentary, an illustrated discography and dozens of previously unpublished photos. Available in 10xLP, Deluxe 4LP, Deluxe 8CD and 3CD editions.

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KATE SIMON

A star is born

In terms of phone tech, Samsung are light years ahead of the competition. An excellent camera is an essential in our favourite gadget and the Galaxy S22 Ultra comes with their best yet. It boasts Advanced Nightography for memories of evenings out and 100 per cent zoom for the all-important close-up, while enhanced battery life means it's ever ready to capture that special moment. Available in black, white, green and burgundy, the Galaxy S22 Ultra is as sleek as it is smart. Prices start from £1,149.

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Keep in time

Swiss luxury watchmaker Audemars Piguet have unveiled five new, limited-edition Royal Oak Offshore timepieces that pay homage to their longstanding ties to the world of music and enduring relationships with singers, producers and songwriters. Available in 37mm and 43mm sizes, the range features details that are beautifully in tune with each other: tapisserie dials recall the pattern of an equaliser found in recording studios, knurled studs are reminiscent of jack plugs, and crown guards are inspired by the fader on mixing consoles. Choose from either titanium, gem-set, 18-carat white gold or black ceramic. They're essentially music to our ears (and wrists).

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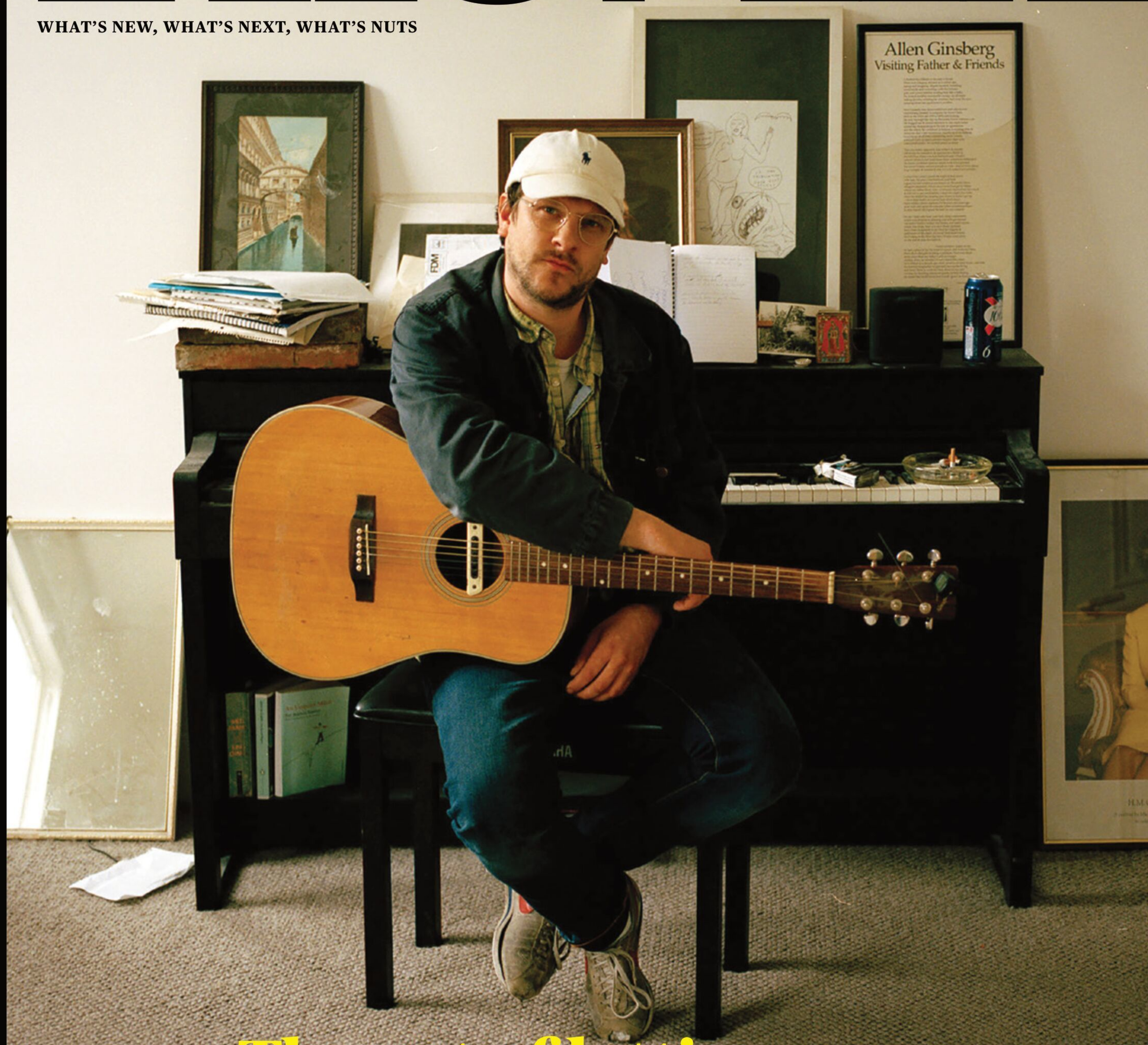
The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS



The art of letting go

It's been six years since his last album, but Jamie T, now returning with new record, The Theory of Whatever, *does not care about this – or many things – as he tells Rolling Stone UK...*

‘JAMIE! JAMIE! JAMIE FUCKING T!”

It’s a Wednesday evening in mid-May and the crowd at west London’s Subterania are delivering an almighty hero’s welcome, minutes before Jamie T is due to perform on stage.

The rapturous reception is testament to the curious position the London singer occupies in 2022. He’s been away for six years, but his timeless tales of nights out, break-ups and everyday life have provided the soundtrack for many a millennial life and cemented his status as British indie royalty.

His latest album, *The Theory of Whatever*, arrives in late July and continues in that time-honoured tradition. But, as he tells Rolling Stone UK over a pint in a Hackney pub, it sees him reaching new personal depths too.

It’s been a long six years since your last record. Where has Jamie T been?

Look, we went into Covid, so you’ve got to take that into account ’cos it just put a two-year gap on everything. But I’ve been writing throughout and it takes me a while to write records. I don’t think I’m necessarily very good at what I do and it takes me a long time to do shit well.

I don’t have a need to be seen the whole time, either. I don’t care and I don’t give a shit! I like making music, but it’s not incredibly important to me. I’d go as far as to say I detest being around all the time. I don’t want to be the type of human being who needs to represent themselves every week and tell everyone what they’re eating in order to be a good musician.

But your return at Subterania showed how much you’ve been missed?

Yeah, it was wonderful. It’s always nice to feel like I have support and I have fans.

***The Theory of Whatever* is your fifth album. Were there any specific themes or sounds you wanted to bring to the record?**

I think my whole career has an arching theme to it. I’m not in a band; I’m a solo artist, so everything I do feels like it should fit in. I suppose I should be able to sit here and tell you what *The Theory of Whatever* is about. To package it up and say something about that, but it’s six years of my fucking life. You try and talk about six years of your life in an easy sentence. It’s impossible.

Sonically, though, there’s a lot of the classic Jamie T sound on there.

Yeah, but do you know what was hard back in the day? Writers describing your sound as being like everyone else but yourself? You know you’re doing all right when other artists are getting reviewed and compared to you. I’ve worked my arse off just to sound like me. I don’t need to move on. I don’t need to progress.

It’s been 15 years since the release of *Panic Prevention*, your debut album. How do you look back on recording that?

Happily. It’s a long time ago, but I’m really proud of that record. It has a lot to do with my best friend, so there’s a lot of love within it. When I listen to it now, I think of me and my best friend creating something original and that’s what I really wanted to achieve. It’s just me and a mate fucking around. There’s a lot of storytelling and shit on that record; people will tell me I sound drunk on it, but they don’t get it! I’m playing characters. It was 17 years ago when I wrote ‘Sheila’ in my bedroom and I’m just proud of it. It was the sound of a 19-year-old boy, his best friend and a computer making a record.

There’s a lot of depth that wasn’t perhaps realised at the time, too. 2007’s ‘So Lonely Was the Ballad’ addresses anxiety and panic attacks at a time when a lot of music didn’t do that.

I’m happy people are appreciative of that, but I’m not gonna sit here and say I was before my time. People have been talking about mental health and anxiety in songs since the beginning of fucking time. But being woke doesn’t mean people didn’t do shit before you. People have paved a path for you to be woke and there’s been a lot of hard graft. I’m very proud of it because I was an anxious little kid who was freaked out by everything. I’m proud of the sensitive side of it: it’s the most powerful thing I’ve ever done.

There’s darkness on the new record, too. ‘Talk Is Cheap’, which is a beautiful ballad, contains the lyric: *“A bag of white/I fade black... I am rudderless.”*

That song is about psychologically losing your shit and it’s important for mental health to have a maypole in your mind, so that as bad as problems might become, there’s something in your sense of self that you can hold onto. That’s what that song is about and I wrote it because I went through that.

Mental health is no joke: it’s serious shit. I’ll never write a song like that again because I never want to write a song like that again. I’m upset that I had to write a song like that because of some terrible, terrible feelings. That situation terrified me.

You’ve got some eclectic collaborators on there too: Matt Maltese on ‘Thank You’. He’s a brilliant songwriter.

I met him through a friend of mine and I fell in love with his music. He reminds me of Paul Heaton from The Beautiful South, who I think is one of the greatest songwriters I’ve heard. When I heard Matt’s music, it usually reminded me of his stuff, and I immediately became obsessed with it.

“I don’t give a shit! I like making music, but it’s not incredibly important to me”

SELF-MADE STAR Jamie says he has “no God-given talent”

MELLOW Jamie T puts his new-found zen down to growing up and learning to care less

We hung out for a bit, although he's obviously a bit busier now. It was wonderful working with him. He wrote that first album when he was 18 – you can't fuck with that shit! Not many people can do that. I love that song we wrote together.

The reaction to that comeback gig and three dates at Brixton Academy on the last tour shows there's still a generation of people whose lives have been soundtracked by your music.

I'm aware of it and I am thankful for it. That's something that not a lot of people have. I cherish everything I have, I really do. But I don't give a fuck and I don't owe no one fucking nothing. The only person I owe anything to is the person I go home to. I don't give a shit. I've done everything off my own back and I'm super proud of it.

I am aware that I can play shows and people will support me. If I didn't have my fans I'd be cut down in a minute, but I can rely on them, which gives me power. I am aware of how lucky I am, selling tickets and putting on shows. My critics might think it's nonsense, but if I sell tickets, then they can fuck off. I know I've worked my fucking arse off to get here. No one can doubt me. I've worked hard at what I do: I'm not a particularly good songwriter, no natural gift. I created [my sound]; no one else sounds like me. I'm happy with where I stand and what I've done, I don't have any God-given talent.

Was there a time when you were less zen?

Yeah, I was struggling with anxiety, panic attacks, and I felt completely out of my depth. It was a constant battle, and it was hard to get help for that when you're playing to 10,000 people, so you do struggle.

Is that an industry-wide problem?

There's a deep problem with it. It's a big topic to get into, but it's very complicated because if you're basically a child, how do you deal with playing to thousands of people and then going home and expecting to be normal? There's not really any support there. We all know people who have passed away. Let's be honest, people have struggled badly and it ain't no fucking joke. This isn't just people suddenly feeling nervous one day. I've had support and I feel very lucky, but I know a lot of people have not and there are many examples recently where people have not been supported and it troubles me. People have watched others implode. But how do you sort it out when there's not a union?

OFF-KEY Jamie thinks new acts should be given more support

Still, you're out there and your latest album proves that you're a voice to be reckoned with.

Yeah, I'm just happy now. I couldn't give less of a fuck. If you take anything from this, I want you to know that I'm zen about this shit. I'm happy and that needs to come across. I've just grown up a bit and it's why I don't give a shit! NICK REILLY

RS RECOMMENDS

STAY ON TRACK WITH OUR PICK OF THE LATEST ONES TO WATCH

Yunè Pinku

Jvck James

M FIELD

Jack Flanagan

New Rules

Max Pope

GHUM

M FIELD

M Field is the solo venture of South African artist and Beatenberg frontman Matthew Field, who serves up summery slices of irreverent indie-pop. Although Vampire Weekend might spring to mind on first listen, his newly released *Re: M Field* EP is proof he's able to add a vital, sun-soaked twist to his sound, too.

Jvck James

With roots in gospel, R&B and reggae music, rising London star Jvck James' early material reveals that he is a true musical polymath. Of stand-out track 'Love in the Club', he notes: "I wanted to make something for everyone to dance to. The song is about being cautious of falling in love in the club, although sometimes we can't help ourselves..."

Yunè Pinku

This 19-year-old Malaysian/Irish producer composes tunes that stem from a love of the dancefloor. She utilises sounds and samples from 90s acid house and UKG, while pitting those powerful beats against lyrics that offer a sharp, introspective focus. Her debut single 'Laylo' is primed to explode in clubs this year.

George Barnett

Casual listeners might notice the laconic, synth-tinged influence of Tame Impala in George Barnett's debut single 'Lovesick', but the east Londoner's lyrics prove more tribal than those of the Australian psych-heroes.

"The song is about being at war with myself. How I think it's OK to treat myself badly – worse than I would ever allow anyone else to treat me," he says. "The song is a conversation between one voice in my head who is trying to bring me down and the other voice who wants me to survive."

Jack Flanagan

On debut album *Rides the Sky*, Mystery Jets bassist Jack Flanagan demonstrates that he's a bold voice in his own right. Drawing on lived experiences and ideas from the past 10 years, Flanagan pairs his thoughts with a hazy mix of psychedelia and rich instrumentation that helps the record to really sing. Lead single 'Skyhorse x Skyhorse' is a highlight.

Max Pope

Max Pope might be a deft hand in masterminding laid-back songs drenched in serotonin, but beneath those tunes exists a touching and relatable ode to growing up and all the struggles that entails.

"The album charts my journey from teenage to adulthood in a world where I have lost my way as often as I have found it," he says of debut album, *Counting Sheep*.

New Rules

"Not a Dua Lipa stan account," reads the understandable disclaimer in New Rules' Twitter account. Perhaps not, but the English-Irish trio are creating pop-driven earworms Dua herself would be proud of. Their track 'Go the Distance' sees the band dealing in irresistible funk-driven bass lines and catchy synths.

GHUM

On debut album *Bitter*, London four-piece GHUM are experts in crafting pounding, melancholic, grunge rock delivered straight from the heart. Their latest stand-out tune 'Bad Brain' is "a song about a mind that is unable to connect to others because of the isolation that negative inner thoughts have created. It's about losing oneself into the dark side of the mind."

QUARRY

Quarry is becoming one of the UK's finest talents for moments of stunning leftfield pop that fail to conform to conventional standards and are all the better for it.

On his psych-tinged song 'Sound of Your Summer', he tells a story of "feeling nostalgic for a lost future". "We all build this idea up in our heads of how things will play out, but it almost never turns out that way," he explains.

"Sometimes we get so attached to this idea that we have to grieve its loss when it's gone, but at the same time, we learn from it. I think you need those kinds of heartbreaking moments in life to really move forward."

Benefits

Teesside newcomers Benefits can be relied upon for uncompromising noise-rock that's combined with spoken-word lyrics to produce impassioned and vital sermons about the state of this green and not-so-pleasant land. "*Where will you be when England burns?*" comes the unrepentant snarl of frontman Kingsley Hall on recent single 'Meat Teeth'.

GHUM: POPPY MARRIOTT, JVCK JAMES: JVCK JAMES/INSTAGRAM, YUNÈ PINKU: RYAN BLACKWELL, NEW RULES: FACEBOOK

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MUSIC

Lava is in the air

In their first EP – a heady blend of Lovers rock, rap and 70s influences – Lava La Rue gives us a taste of what's to come

'THIS IS THE first painting I ever made," explains Lava La Rue, gesturing to a swirling mass of neon-hued monsters pouring out of the River Thames like mutant Loch Ness monsters. "I made this when I was 16 – it's a London dystopia, but a really hyper-psychedelic version."

The apocalytic dreamscape is plastered across the walls of their home in Ladbroke Grove, an area they've lived in all their life. Incidentally, it's a neat visual fit for La Rue's art, which searches out personal connection, love and community, even as the mean, greedy suits try to shrink and sanitise the capital.

La Rue may have found their creative family in the shape of NiNE8, but it's fair to say that the collective – which also includes Irish rapper Biig Piig and Dirty Hit-signed producer Mac Wetha – have flourished in spite of the city, as well as because of it. Back in 2014, NiNE8's very first show was closed down by the police, which inadvertently brought heaps of early attention, but also highlighted the institutionally racist and classist agenda of London's gatekeepers.

"You go to Shoreditch on a Saturday night, and the white middle-class workforce [are there] getting absolutely shit-faced," La Rue says. "But when it's like a hip-hop night, or grime night, or just anything that seems like a DIY night, instantly

"Look at our prime minister. The rowdiest party boy of them all"

the community police are at their door being like: 'Turn the volume down, you need to shut down, you need to clear off the streets.'

"And I mean, what is the biggest irony? The people who are in the government and enforce these rules are having rowdy parties for themselves," they say, referencing the calls for Boris Johnson to resign over a culture of flagrant partying at Downing Street during the national lockdowns. "Look at our prime minister. He's the rowdiest fucking party boy of them all."

Drawing on an amorphous blend of influences – pulling from the spirit of west London's potent 70s scene, the swoon of Lovers rock, and contemporary acid-hued rap – La Rue's music is slippery and hard to pin down, a product of the mixing pot of cultures that surrounded them growing up in west London.

"We all lived on the same block together, and we went home and would eat each other's food, and speak each other's slang. I was raised by the Caribbean side of my family, and music is so inherent to that culture. My grandma took me to Black church, and my parents, who are quite young, were ravers. My mum listened to a lot of pirate radio: jungle, drum'n'bass, 90s happy hardcore and that kind of stuff."

And accordingly, traces of rocksteady, warm washes of house melody and light-footed funk guitars all underpin the multi-talented artist's new EP, *Hi-Fidelity*, out in July. Made between LA and London, the upcoming release renders the heady rush of lust and queer romance in bold, bright technicolour – a deliberate step away from the lo-fi labels pinned on La Rue's DIY beginnings.

Thanks to the excellently raunchy one-liner that kicks off 'Don't Trip' ("*shining like a metal tongue/Riding my clit*") to the strutting title-track collaboration with La Rue's best mate and fellow NiNE8 member Biig Piig, it certainly feels like their most cohesive, confident release to date. An early glimpse of a debut album, perhaps? La Rue replies with a loaded eyebrow wiggle, shortly followed by an exaggerated comedy wink. "I'm thinking about it," they quip, "don't you worry." **EL HUNT**

BLACKKSOCKS

House of the Dragon *vs* The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power

As the multi-million live action prequels of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* go head-to-head on streaming platforms this autumn, which one is for you? Choose your fighter... DARREN SCOTT

	House of the Dragon	The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power
How to Watch	Releasing to Sky Atlantic/NOW from 22 August	Releasing to Prime Video from 2 September
Format	Live action, 10 episodes	Live action, eight episodes
Creators	Ryan J. Condal and George R.R. Martin	JD Payne and Patrick McKay
Star Power	Matt Smith as Prince Daemon Targaryen, Paddy Considine as King Viserys I Targaryen and Rhys Ifans as Ser Otto Hightower top the bill of a huge ensemble cast.	*Game of Thrones'* Robert Aramayo as Elrond, *His Dark Materials'* Morfydd Clark as Galadriel, *Years and Years'* Maxim Baldry as Isildur, and Lenny Henry lead a notably diverse ensemble cast.
What's the Take?	It's a prequel, set 200 years before the *Game of Thrones* series, based on creator Martin's *Fire & Blood* novel. It's the beginning of the end of House Targaryen — so yes, you can expect dragons, gruesome deaths and lots of sex. (Brother/sister incest unconfirmed.)	Pre-dating the storylines depicted in the movies by thousands of years (in case you hadn't noticed, J.R.R. Tolkien didn't do things by halves), this series is based on the expansive history of Middle-earth. It also boasts the title of the most expensive TV show ever made. (Luckily, they got it signed off ahead of the cost of living crisis...)
Signs of Trouble?	*Game of Thrones'* eighth and final season was largely met with disapproval by the global fanbase. Can this prequel redeem it?	Legal reasons mean the series is not a continuation — or linked to — Peter Jackson's hugely successful film franchise, but is intended to 'evoke' those films.
Expectations	There's still more than enough adulation for *Game of Thrones* to make this must-see TV — with many expecting it to lead to a wider reboot of the franchise. A Jon Snow spin-off is reportedly in development.	Five seasons are already approved — so it's just as well that early preview footage has been met with wide approval by hardcore Tolkien fan groups. Which is probably a good thing after the disappointing *Hobbit* trilogy.
Verdict	🗡🗡🗡	🗡🗡🗡🗡

(TOP, CENTRE & BELOW RIGHT): MATT GRACE/PRIME VIDEO; (TOP RIGHT, LEFT, BELOW & CENTRE): PHOTOGRAPH BY OLLIE UPTON/HBO; (RIGHT, CENTRE): BEN ROTHSTEIN/PRIME VIDEO; (CENTRE LEFT, CENTRE RIGHT & BACKGROUND): ISTOCK

MUSIC

Is FLO the next Great British girl group?

With an R&B sound that draws from the past and the present, this trio are already getting noticed

FLO (Left to right) Stella, Jorja and Renée

IF YOU'VE YET to hear of the music of FLO, most might wonder where you've been the past few months. When the London trio dropped debut single 'Cardboard Box', it managed to cause a flurry online, to say the least; the likes of Missy Elliott and SZA shared their appreciation with the video now sitting at more than two million views.

Not bad for a first release. When I pose these facts to FLO, aka Jorja Douglas, Renée Downer and Stella Quaresma, who call in from a studio where they're recording their debut EP, they are ceaselessly humble about their growing acclaim. But you can sense their pleasure through the giggles and chirpiness that spills over in our chat. "It feels good," Jorja says. "It's a relief that everyone loves it."

Created by pop maverick MNEK, the beauty of their sound is how it flitters between contemporary and nostalgic. Harking to the golden days of early-00s and late-90s R&B, 'Cardboard Box' is all lush harmonies and strong vocals. But their music isn't intentionally retro, they say; instead, it's a natural progression from what hit their ears in childhood. "When we're in the studio, it's not even like, 'Oh, let's do a Timbaland beat!'" says Jorja. "It's nostalgic because that's the music that has influenced us the most."

The group are looking to blend those influences with contemporary sounds: "I feel like [our music] takes the best bits from now and the 90s; it's struck the perfect balance," Stella offers. "We want people to be surprised and feel like we're bringing something back from when music was quality."

With the three girls aged 19 or 20, much of their core musical palette had its heyday decades before their births (the likes of Brandy, Mariah Carey, Mary J. Blige and Faith Evans are all referenced during our chat).

It was their mothers who inspired the trio's interest in music. "I had to ask my mum to buy me the iTunes 99p songs," Stella giggles. "And then every year she got me the *Now That's What I Call Music* album."

"Oh, yeah!" Jorja concurs, continuing their endearing habit of completing each other's thoughts. "Everything I had was my mum's when she was done with it. Even her iPod; it had all the American old-school R&B songs."

"One of my earliest memories is listening to music in the car with my mum," Renée recalls. "I remember me and her screaming lyrics with so much passion; that memory always brings me back to why I love music."

Renée and Stella, who was born in Mozambique and moved to the UK aged five, met each other at school, while Jorja had lived in Hertfordshire and came into singing during her mid-teens.

"We want people to feel like we're bringing something back from when music was quality"

When they all started attending open auditions to join a girl group as a way to bolster their careers, Stella and Renée gravitated towards Jorja when meeting on the circuit and became familiar through social media. They'd spotted each other at one of their last auditions prior to becoming a group, and the palpable connection encouraged them to form a trio in 2019. "It made the most sense in terms of chemistry," Jorja says. "And then when we had our final audition, it was electric."

The girls signed to Island Records in 2020. Their label put them through a period of artist development including writing camps to hone their sound, along with studio time to develop their upcoming EP. So what are FLO's hopes for the future?

Although their careers have only just begun, they exude a seriousness about their artistry that's evident when they discuss fighting for 'Cardboard Box' to be their first release. "It was quite a risk putting out such a big song when no one knows who you are. But we knew that that was the song that could represent us the best," Jorja says.

"As a band we're incredibly hard-working and hold ourselves to the highest standard. We never want to do something without giving our all," Renée adds.

It's a work ethic that we'll hopefully see in their upcoming EP, something they describe as "quintessential FLO".

If the buzz so far is anything to go by, listeners worldwide will be holding out to see what that entails.

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MUSIC

The comeback kid

Paolo Nutini has been conspicuous by his eight-year absence. As he breaks his silence with new album* Last Night in the Bittersweet, *he tells* Rolling Stone UK *what he's been up to and why he can't wait to perform live

BY **NICK REILLY**

"RIGHT, ENOUGH'S enough," tweeted Scottish superstar Lewis Capaldi in early 2020, "where the fuck is Paolo Nutini?"

The tweet clearly struck a chord. It garnered 13,000 retweets from a legion of fans who, like Capaldi, were eagerly awaiting the return of one of Scotland's most distinctive voices. At that point, it had been six years since Nutini's acclaimed third album, *Caustic Love* – a record which saw him delivering a timeless and enduring love letter to R&B and soul. But when touring duties for that album came to an end, he largely disappeared from the limelight. Bar a handful of charity performances in 2017, there was nothing to hint at a full return.

Some two years and the small matter of a pandemic later, the artist has finally made his much-anticipated comeback with *Last Night in the Bittersweet*, a record which justifies that absence and is arguably his most complete to date. It sees Nutini's blue-eyed-soul vocals paired with a vast, kaleidoscopic sound that takes in everything from the recent trend for spoken word on the rocking 'Lose It' to hints of Krautrock on the sprawling 'Heart Filled Up'.

Still, the question remains: just where has Nutini been for the past eight years?

The answer emerges as Rolling Stone UK sits down with him at a London hotel in mid-May. As we talk, he is at the end of a rousing five-night residency at the legendary 100 Club which has been attended by fellow singers Capaldi and Geordie star Sam Fender, who shared Instagram videos from the show and hailed Nutini as one of his teenage heroes.

"The realities of doing this and the whole experience doesn't feel entirely natural to me," he says of performing. "I'm not the most extroverted person, but when you're on a stage you find yourself opening yourself up in that way. The more vulnerable the better, too, when you're trying to give your audience a piece of you and you're hoping to get something back. Once that ends, I've always had to recalibrate my fucking brain."

That process of recalibration, it turns out, took the form of a journey to retrace his steps. He had lived the life of a global touring artist but, as is so often the case, found himself restricted to doing short stop-offs in cities which meant he was unable to truly acquaint himself with his surroundings.

"Sometimes you'd just get a couple of nights in these places and a small taste of what they're about. I tried to go back and spend some time there," he says of his globetrotting downtime. "I'm lucky I'm able to do that. I'd go away on a Monday and say I was coming back on a Thursday, but I'd return two months later, having made some great, mad experiences along the way."

"I was compromising who I was, I wasn't giving myself respect"

Throughout, Nutini says he never stopped writing; indeed his travel adventures have shaped the sound of the record. Its title, he explains, reflects a period of personal turbulence he has been living through behind the scenes.

"There was a long period of life for me that could have been defined as bittersweet. The juxtaposition between the ups and the downs was really quick. It wasn't in terms of my career, just emotionally," he confides.

"I think I became very content in that rhythm and I guess there was a point where I sought to move out of that and become a happier person. I'm still in the process, but it was a conscious attempt to figure out what was causing that and to try and conquer that."

Although he refuses to dwell on the subject for too long, he adds: "A lot of the stuff I was doing to myself, I wasn't dealing with myself in ways that were the healthiest.

BACK ON TRACK (Left) On stage at London's 100 Club; (below) Nutini has used his hiatus to work on his mental health

I was just compromising who I was a lot and I wasn't giving myself a lot of care or respect. That was holding me in a position that I wanted to get out of."

These experiences are only too clear on the album. A late stand-out comes in 'Abigail', a Bert Jansch-esque folk number which sees the 35-year-old Nutini wistfully dreaming of a life of domestic bliss with a wife and children. "*Lord I wanna get happy, before I get old*" he purrs on the contemplative track.

"I wanna be a happy person and I'm not always content," he says of the song, which was written in his parents' garden while he bubbled up with them during lockdown.

"But again, it was recognising this need to make changes in order to be a happier person. It's not something that someone can exclusively do for you. There's so many different reasons why people could be looking at themselves in the way I was, but it became very clear that the problem was me."

Still, this introspection is merely one aspect of a record which overwhelmingly fizzes with the energy of a man who is happy to be back at the day job once more.

Take the opening track, 'Afterneath', which opens with a soul-searing howl from Nutini, before psych-driven guitars eventually make way for an unlikely sample of Patricia Arquette's memorable speech in the final scenes of *True Romance*, the 1993 cult classic written by Quentin Tarantino.

In order to use it, Nutini personally sought clearance from the film-maker himself. "It's a brutal film but also a beautiful story as well and I just always wanted to use that little speech," he tells me. "We asked Tarantino if we could use it and, luckily, he said yes, which we were told wasn't entirely common practice, which made it nicer. It was a cool thing."

"It is a privilege to go out and communicate with people on such a scale"

Elsewhere, the inspiration for the aforementioned narrated style on 'Lose It' struck while he burned the midnight oil in the recording studio.

"When you start a song that late and you come out with an idea, if someone's reaction is just more than 'Let's fucking go to bed,' then you're onto something. And that's what happened.

"I'm not sure what led me down that path. It was a quick song to come together and a lot of what you hear came from the exceptional players that were able to add to it."

The timing of his return, Nutini reveals, has left him with a newfound appreciation for what he does. Although his latest collection of songs is far from a pandemic album, he says the lack of community and socialising during that time certainly hastened his comeback.

"I've never stopped writing songs and writing ideas and that's what gives me my kicks. Even if they sit half-finished for a year, I feel like I'm happy regardless of what I'm doing at the time," he says.

"But over the past two years, watching how it's affected everybody, that social shutdown, it made me think that it is a real privilege to go out and communicate with people on such a scale. And to have the outlet of release that performing on a stage can give."

Performances, no less, that included a headline set at TRNSMT Festival in Glasgow, a party-starting city in a country where the Paisley-born singer's music has elevated him to godlike status. That set represented his biggest chance to finally show off his sprawling opus of a fourth album.

"I get the tunes out there and I already feel a bit lighter," he says. "But it's not just that; you're giving other people a good buzz and a good kick. It's a good feeling. It makes you feel like you're doing something right."

After such a long period away, you sense that none of his fans would argue with that. ®

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Our rivers: the dirty truth

Thanks to agriculture, sewage, roads and single-use plastics, not one river in England is unpolluted. Incensed by the state of our waterways, 80s Irish pop star and keen fly fisherman Feargal Sharkey is determined to make the Environment Agency and the water companies clean up their act

BY SIMON CHILDS

FEARGAL SHARKEY USED to be someone who might appear in the pages of Rolling Stone because of his music. The Derry-born singer shot to fame with the Undertones, with their legendary single 'Teenage Kicks' — a song so good John Peel played it twice in a row on Radio 1.

From there he had a successful solo career before moving into the business side of the industry, eventually becoming head of UK Music, the music industry's umbrella lobby group. But today Rolling Stone UK is speaking to him in his latest incarnation — Sharkey the environmentalist, hell bent on saving our rivers from wholesale pollution.

Britain's water companies have admitted to discharging raw sewage into rivers and seas more than 1,000 times a day in 2021. This is despite the rule that untreated human waste, dirty water and rainwater should only be released via storm overflow pipes in extreme weather to relieve pressure in the sewerage system. However, over the past three years, water companies have used the overflows as a matter of routine, discharging untreated sewage rather than processing it.

Sharkey is now a champion of Britain's rivers, making regular appearances railing against pollution in the media and, in April 2021, in front of a committee of MPs. He might be just what these unique and delicate ecosystems need.

"Campaigning is something I never planned on doing"

WATERWORLD
Feargal Sharkey has made cleaning up Britain's rivers and waterways his mission

ALAMY

When we meet, Sharkey has just spent a couple of hours watching wild brown trout feasting on mayfly on a river in north London. Being in nature, he says, helps him to "push all the other rubbish to the back of my mind".

Most people reading this will know you as a legendary punk singer and solo artist. So how did you end up as an environmental campaigner?

I've been fly fishing longer than I was ever a musician. I developed an interest at school. In Derry, because of the location, I could get on a bus in the centre of town and go in one direction, and 20 minutes later find myself on the banks of the River Faughan, with a fairly reasonable possibility of catching the salmon.

Did you keep the fishing up when you were with the Undertones?

Clearly, for a few years rock'n'roll took precedent! But when I started doing the executive thing, I began to develop a pattern. It's quite easy working for record companies to get sucked into just incredible, lunatic hours. So I got into this thing that every five or six weeks, I would deliberately take off a long weekend and go and just do something really nice. It was during that process that I rediscovered my love of fly fishing. It became some weird form of therapy. There's an old saying: "There is more to fishing than catching fish."

TROUBLED WATERS
The River Lea in Hertfordshire is stagnating due to lack of flow

How did this lead to your campaigning?

The campaigning thing is not something I ever planned on doing. I effectively retired ten years ago. The Amwell Magna Fishery — the oldest fishing club in England — owns two-and-a-half miles of the River Lea in Hertfordshire. When I became its chairman, it became clear that there were a number of issues involving the flow and volume of the water — it was stagnating due to lack of flow. The Environment Agency had known what the problem was since 2003 and how to rectify it — and, quite frankly, did nothing about it, or as little as possible, until we started taking them to the High Court to get everyone's attention.

That made me curious. If a little bunch of people who just want to go fishing had to take the very government agencies supposed to be protecting those rivers to the High Court, what the hell else was going on out there that nobody knew about? That gave me an itch. And rather stupidly, I scratched that itch. Well, it turns out for the past three and a half years, I've been scratching that itch every day — and I've just ended up with an even bigger itch.

You found out that this wasn't an isolated problem?

There is not a single river in England that is not polluted — not one. And people have known about this stuff for decades. We've got three decades of lack of political oversight and a complete failure of the regulators — the Environment Agency and Ofwat. The water industry has completely gamed the system to their benefit. Water companies have over the past 30 years extracted in the region of £72 billion of value in terms of dividends and interest payments. That's £72 billion worth of bill-payers' money. And in return, we've ended up with rivers full of sewage.

In the south-east of England, you have the added bonus of over-abstraction being caused by water companies to provide water for public water supply, because it was the cheapest thing for the water companies to do. Now, bear in mind that there are only 225 chalk streams on the entire planet. They are some of the rarest habitats on Earth and about 85 per cent of them are here in southern and south-east England.

"If you're going to do something in life, then do it properly. Don't screw around, don't waste the opportunity"

Do you feel like you're making any progress politically?

We're on the agenda. Were we on the agenda three years ago? No. The problem is that the government have done the classic knee-jerk, Whitehall, bureaucratic reaction and produced a 'process' and it's designed to make everyone look like they're being busy and doing things, but all of it, quite frankly, is utterly meaningless and pointless. I think the plan is that possibly, maybe, they might be able to save some of these rivers by 2050. A lot of these rivers, like the River Wye, don't have another three years, never mind another 30 years.

Do you ever wish you could just chill out?

This is where you get into the slightly Freudian bit of the discussion. One of my earliest childhood memories is being about 10 years old in around 1968. I'm in the middle of this protest march, walking down the middle of the dual carriageway waving what I later figured out was an anarchist flag, taking part in this People's Democracy March, which was the real left-wing end of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland. And that was my parents. They instilled in all their children a sense that where there is a perceived injustice, do not under any circumstances sit idly by and do nothing about it. There's a second layer to that: that if you're going to do something, anything, in life, then do it properly. Don't screw around, don't waste the opportunity. Don't take some half-arsed approach to something. That explains the pattern my life developed.

So here's the thing, Mr Government, it's a very easy game to play. You know what you need to do to sort this out. Get on with it, come up with a plan, fix it. And I will happily, quietly, and successfully go back into my retirement and with some pleasure leave you alone. ®

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SCAN ME

Current Affairs

The European mass graves you never knew about

Thirty years before Bucha, before the massacre in Srebrenica, mass graves were dug and filled with thousands of civilian victims in a conflict on the borders of Europe. With their remains only being unearthed and catalogued today, Taras Kuzio asks what happened and discusses why these crimes must be revisited

IN EARLY APRIL 2022, Adalat Verdiyev was the first of a group of military engineers to make a grim discovery. While digging the foundations for a temporary building in Farrukh Heights, a tiny hilltop town in Karabakh, Azerbaijan, in the South Caucasus, they uncovered 20 bodies. They had rested there for 30 years, while above them, life for those who had moved into the dead people's homes had simply gone on uninterrupted.

Other bodies have been revealed in the ghost towns of Karabakh. In Edilli, Aghdam, Fuzuli, Khojavand and Shusha, close to 200 corpses have been found in exploratory digs in the first three months of this year alone. Some finds were unexpected, but elsewhere those searching knew precisely what they would unearth: the remains of some of the 4,000 Azerbaijanis still missing from the war over the southwest territory of Nagorno-Karabakh fought between Armenia and Azerbaijan a generation ago.

Europe and the world stand aghast at the horrors of Bucha in Ukraine, where decomposing bodies were found discarded in the streets. But in Karabakh, the site of a mostly forgotten conflict on Europe's distant borders, the same had been seen 30 years before. What places Farrukh Heights and Bucha apart is not the design, nor the attention. It is simply the passage of time: not weeks, as in Bucha, but a generation in Karabakh before friends and relatives have been able to recover the bodies and pay respects to their dead.

What happened in the early 90s and why is little known beyond the Caucasus. For the world to understand, these atrocities must now be revisited.

THE EARLY 90S Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia – who laid claim to the Karabakh region due to its majority Armenian population – escaped scrutiny. The Cold War, most westerners

BODIES OF EVIDENCE

Previous page: a mine clearance team from ANAMA (Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action); This page (clockwise from top): a victim of the Khojaly massacre is brought to a makeshift morgue in Aghdam, February 1992; a Khojaly survivor with a photo of his missing son; a woman identifies a dead relative following the Khojaly killings

THIS PAGE: REZA; OPPOSITE: ARCHIVE OF AZERTAC

believed, was won. Whatever might have been happening in the Caucasus was Moscow's problem; any suggestion that the West might involve itself in Russia's immediate backyard would only fuel the idea that the Soviet Union's fall had been anything but an unadulterated success. No one wanted to muddy that narrative.

What news coverage there was of the massacre at Khojaly, where 613 Azerbaijani civilians were killed by Armenian forces on one day in February 1992, was soon forgotten. It was one of many incidents in a war that lasted half a decade.

Two years later, the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda and then Srebrenica in Bosnia in 1995 shocked the world. The preceding war in the Caucasus should by rights have registered as a wake-up call for what was to come. In the first two years of the 90s, 30,000 – mostly civilian – Azerbaijanis were murdered when Armenia gained the upper hand with support from Moscow.

The prize was Karabakh (known to Armenians as "Artsakh"), a region where Azerbaijanis and Armenians had lived side by side for generations. For hundreds of years, its hilltops were home to Armenian churches, Shia and Sunni Azeri mosques, and even the occasional Russian Orthodox onion dome. Agricultural labour was tough in winter, life was far from perfect, and long-held prejudices were too often left unaddressed. Yet widespread intermarriage, movement between faiths and families was evidence that, though complex, this was a stable community.

But by the war's end in 1994, a fifth of Azerbaijan was under Armenian control. Around 860,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis fled, but 4,000 were left behind: the murdered and missing. Only now are their remains being uncovered and accounted for.

Few make the connection between the horrors of the Soviet disintegration and events in Karabakh, Rwanda and Bosnia. The collapse or departure – and then silence – of their Cold War sponsor was not the cause, but it was a trigger: the lid torn off from deadening authoritarian control that had repressed but never suppressed ethnic divisions. Facing economic crises and societal flux, venal politicians would revive them in all three.

IN THE DECADE PRIOR to the Soviet Union's collapse, sharp economic decline gave way to reactionary and racist political forces. Convincing embittered and impoverished populations of their victimhood at the hands of a demonic ethnic 'other', politicians such as Robert Kocharian, first president of Artsakh – a state which is not internationally recognised – and later president of Armenia, proclaimed "Armenians and Azerbaijanis are ethnically, genetically incompatible." So powerful was this racist message that a succession of political and military leaders from Artsakh transitioned to lead Armenia itself. Kocharian was succeeded as president of Armenia by Serzh Sargsyan. Riding the same wave as his predecessor, Sargsyan had been defence minister of Armenia during the 90s Armenian-Azerbaijan war when Kocharian was leader of Artsakh. "Before Khojaly, the Azerbaijanis thought that they were joking with us, they thought the Armenians were people who could not raise their hand against the civilian population. We needed to put a stop to all that," said Sargsyan, without remorse, eight years after the massacre which saw children butchered and others burned or decapitated.

But Khojaly was only the first. Shusha, an exquisite medieval town, witnessed the battle that started to turn the war. A mass grave housing the hundreds executed by the victors was only unearthed in 2021. Next, Aghdam, an industrial town of some 30,000, was cleansed, tiles stripped from roofs, family heirlooms taken and sold, every building demolished – except for the mosque left standing to be desecrated as a pigsty. From an original plan to "liberate" Stepanakert, Artsakh's capital, and its surrounds from Azerbaijani control, a more expansive and organised effort evolved: to rid the whole of Karabakh of ethnic Azerbaijanis and then seal it off from the rest of Azerbaijan with a buffer zone of newly cleansed and demolished ghost towns. That zone was filled with land mines. In the recent war, these were added to as Armenian forces retreated. It is estimated it will take more than a decade to clear them.

TO DATE, BOTH Kocharian and Sargsyan remain unrepentant. On the contrary: their activities during the war have been the making of their domestic political careers. Rather, the burden of justification has fallen to the Armenian diaspora, which forms a sizeable and effective lobbying force – particularly in France and the US.

DISPLACED (above left): Azerbaijani refugees flee Kalbajar; (above right): Azerbaijani refugees arrive by helicopter

"Aghdam, a town of some 30,000, was cleansed and every building demolished – except for the mosque left standing to be desecrated as a pigsty"

KILLING FIELDS
In the first Armenian–Azerbaijani war, a buffer zone of newly 'cleansed' ghost towns was filled with land mines. In the recent war, these were added to as Armenian forces retreated. It is estimated that it will take more than a decade to clear them

THIS PAGE: ANAMA; OPPOSITE: STATE COMMISSION FOR PRISONERS OF WAR, HOSTAGES AND MISSING PERSONS

This year, as support for Ukraine became the focus of appropriations by US Congressional budgeteers, this chasm of disconnect was writ large: Rep. Adam Schiff, vice-chairman of the Congressional Armenian Caucus, called on House and Senate Appropriations to fund Artsakh to the tune of $50 million. The justification for being handed US taxpayers' cash was that these were "democrats and allies" whose lands, culture and very existence were under threat from a revanchist Azerbaijan.

But the idea that Artsakh or even Armenia are friends of the West is just as baseless a fiction as that which claimed Azerbaijanis and Armenians could never live together. Only days into the Ukraine war, the president of Artsakh called for the liberation of Donetsk and Luhansk – sovereign regions of Ukraine – by Russia's invading forces. Kocharian has been on the board of AFK Sistema, the Russian corporate giant, since 2009; only a month before Russia's Ukraine invasion he called for Armenia's "full-fledged integration" with Russia through the subsuming of Armenia into the "Union State of Russia and Belarus", a political entity that has united those two nations since the end of the Soviet Union.

Other, more recent political leaders – often hyped as pro-Western – have proved no less pro-Russian under pressure. Current prime minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, elected by a westward-hopeful youth vote, currently chairs Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the six-nation military alliance of which Armenia is part. His economy minister has publicly encouraged Russian companies to move to Armenia – a member of Russia's five-country economic and customs pact – for sanctions avoidance. Pashinyan himself said, "We must discuss what operational decisions need to be made to ensure that these negative effects are minimal or, if possible, circumvent them through appropriate decisions."

However, western politicians – some dependent on the Armenian diaspora for votes, others on the right because of religious bias – choose to believe a compelling story of how Artsakh is the ancestral lands of the first Christian people of the Caucasus, and the cradle of modern Armenia. Moscow spins a similar tale of Kievan Rus – today's Ukraine – as the medieval national, cultural, and religious precursor to the Russian Federation.

ARMENIA NO LONGER controls all of Karabakh. In 2020, the two countries went to war again, with much of the occupation reversed. In the areas regained, the rumoured yet hitherto unverifiable mass graves are now being unearthed. Once exhumed, the contents are documented, then samples matched to those from relatives stored at a DNA bank.

This is the long, meticulous search for truth that can bring closure to the nation's darkest chapter. Without it, the wounds will not heal; the grip of the past unable to yield to a more reconciliatory future.

Instead, the forensics of science will replace the politics of memory, the destructive capacity of the latter on full display in Ukraine today. For Azerbaijanis, the material proof of the fate of family members offers the chance to move forward. In a region of stale antagonisms, a broader story might now emerge that can accommodate both Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Karabakh – just as in the past.

For Armenians, this could be more difficult. Having grown used to the status quo of occupation, and a political narrative that told them their conquest was just, Karabakh's loss may sit uneasily. But there are also many in Armenia that see the retention of the region in breach of international law as a nationalist phantom, and a distraction from more pressing domestic concerns such as corruption, endemic unemployment and a stuttering economy. All three issues have been fed in part by the occupation: Armenia's resultant regional isolation has hampered economic development, while occupants of office ensure dwindling opportunities are dispersed to those that will pay in kind.

For those that see such truths know that the recent conflict need not lead to another tit-for-tat situation. A peace deal yet unsigned could secure the many rights of Armenians in Karabakh, without the need for occupation their former leaders proclaimed existentially necessary. The ghosts of the past, on both sides of the border, must now be laid to rest if a different future is to unfurl. ®

THE TRUTH UNCOVERED Excavating mass graves at Edilli earlier this year

"This is the long, meticulous search for truth that can bring closure to the nation's darkest chapter. Without it, the wounds will not heal"

TARAS KUZIO IS A RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY AND PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF KYIV MOHYLA ACADEMY. HIS BOOK, *RUSSIAN NATIONALISM AND THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR*, IS OUT NOW

Can True Love Exist Any More?

The 1975's Matty Healy Isn't Sure

But he hopes so

By Hannah Ewens

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAMUEL BRADLEY
FASHION DIRECTION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN
STYLING BY PATRICIA VILLIRILLO

"Instead of calling me out, you should be pulling me in"

– 'SINCERITY IS SCARY', THE 1975 (2018)

i.

I'M WATCHING THE side profile of Matty Healy from his right as he formulates an answer in slow motion. The light is hitting him from his left through sheets of glass that showcase a Japanese zen garden. I had expected quicker responses from The 1975 frontman. Known as the spokesperson for the millennial generation – in the world of music at least – he's always ready with a striking quote or, until recently, a tweet that will elicit praise and fury in equal weighting. But that's not him any more. He no longer wants to be a mouthpiece and he certainly doesn't want to become more famous than he already is.

He basically looks like Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*, if the sculpture was smoking a spliff and wearing tan Tabis. I write that with the implied smirk I believe Healy would approve of. He's a man who lives the impossible task of balancing extensive use of cultural references and self-awareness; a man who has a first edition of *Infinite Jest* with a bookmark placed a quarter of the way through for display in the next room, partly because he's a David Foster Wallace fan but mostly as a nod to that joke about everyone having a copy of it a quarter-read. A man – white, straight – whose willingness to talk about art and ideas has sometimes been viewed, in our postmodern, nihilistic and hyper-consumptive era, as pretentious. He thinks his brain works fast rather than well but he's sharp enough to be the person who captured what people think of him best in a 2016 *Rolling Stone* interview: "quite obnoxious but quite sincere."

This introduction should be read as playful, not only because Healy is funny and likeable, but because he explicitly told me not to write that he's taking dramatic pauses. In fairness, they're not dramatic so much as they are active. This is the first time he's speaking about his forthcoming album to a person outside his inner circle, someone who is here to professionally question him after he said in 2020 that he was doing his last interviews. "I don't like it that much because it's so scary," he explains of the process. "I think I'd gotten to a point where I didn't know how much I wanted to qualify my statements."

Being a mouthpiece had become genuinely exhausting after years of inadvertently saying he feels like the messiah sometimes, hypothesising that dating Taylor Swift would be emasculating and ad-libbing about misogyny in hip-hop. He was drawn into a cycle of repenting and re-offending for such things, the majority of which occurred in the media or on social networks. But it's equally true that doing interviews was an unwelcome reminder that being Matty Healy is a job. One that didn't suit someone who is a "big man child" sometimes. Being 33 – his current age – does not mean going (and he says this in a Kevin the Teenager voice) "I don't want to do that." This stretch of his life is about showing up and doing what needs to be done.

That said, it's written interviews that are the problem and you can understand his concern around that – you can't see that I'm laughing at his jokes or that his take, one that looks bolder written down, was prompted by my original question. Now it's used as the headline: 'Matty Healy doesn't believe true love exists any more', or something. He understands that his vocalism won him a fanbase and critical praise; that it's what makes him both divisive and interesting as a cultural figure. Hence, he seems nervous the first time we meet at his Rolling Stone UK photoshoot and apprehensive when I'm at his house in north London, although his PR and manager are present. He's careful to word things with measured exactness, he's saying things – thoughtful, quite lovely things – off the record and he's editing his opinions for me out loud. There's a sense of (perhaps justified) paranoia – at one point in our interview I nudge my phone

"I'm not apologising for stuff, just because I don't think you should or I should or anyone should who isn't a bigot or a racist or violent or a criminal"

PREVIOUS PAGE: MATTY WEARS COAT BY ANN DEMEULEMEESTER, SHIRT, MATTY'S OWN; THIS PAGE: MATTY WEARS VINTAGE HELMUT LANG JUMPER, VINTAGE GUCCI TROUSERS, VINTAGE HERMES BOOTS, VINTAGE BRACELET AND EARRINGS, MATTY'S OWN, SUNGLASSES BY RAYBAN

"There's always been a lot of 'will they, won't they' with my band. Will they split up? Will they not? Will I get over drugs...? I love the drama of it"

to check that it's still recording and he says that he has me covered and nudges his own. His screen lights up and I notice that it's also recording our conversation.

When I ask him about this the following week, he says he recorded me for three reasons: as a back-up for me if I had a recording problem; because for years a 1975 documentary has been in the making and perhaps the audio could come in useful; to keep a record of our conversation in case he is misconstrued (not that he'd come out on Twitter and say "I have the recording and I *actually* said *this*," he assures me). All concerns lead to the fact that he no longer wants to justify the statements he makes any more. "I won't be doing any apologies nowadays," he says. "I'm not apologising for stuff, just because I don't think *you* should or I should or anyone should who isn't a bigot or a racist or violent or a criminal. I don't believe that I am. So, I just want to make sure there's context so I don't have to."

Anyway, back in his house, Healy says there is so much written information in the world, in the form of captions, tweets, interviews, reviews, that we should look to other forms to communicate with each other. "If you are a person who can convey information, can convey words and ideas, without writing it down you should really do that. Just do that. *Try* and just do that. I don't know how many interviews I need from David Byrne. I don't know how many interviews I would have needed from Velazquez, do you know what I mean? I'm *not comparing myself* to David Byrne and Velazquez before you wryly smile at me like that..." (I laugh.)

It's new-new media that he's interested in as a consumer and occasional participant now: Substack newsletters and Dimes Square podcasts like the edgy comedy of *Cumtown* or culture commentary of *Red Scare*, though not so much the political content of the latter. He'd like to go on *The Joe Rogan Experience* – during a two-and-a-half-hour conversation with the controversial American podcaster, he believes he could speak at length on topics without talking points being distorted by edits.

No longer doing interviews made sense when he originally said it. The 1975 was inarguably the most culturally relevant band of the 2010s, making genre-splicing music before that was a cliché because all music is now, and writing extensively about our pervasive internet and social media use. The decade itself had ended as Healy left his 20s, a time of his life characterised by drug abuse, rehab and the extended adolescence of being a rock star. Where to go from there?

Next year, the band will have been making music together in some form for 20 years. Their formation is well documented: classmates Matthew Healy – the first-born child of TV actors Denise Welch and Tim Healy – and drummer George Daniel met at school in Cheshire and became firm friends. They formed various musical projects that resulted in British boy band The 1975, an act that couldn't get signed by any major label in the world. The endless industry conversations and disappointment left Healy confused. The band and their manager Jamie Oborne decided that they would join Dirty Hit, Oborne's own indie label that's now what XL Recordings was to millennials for the Zoomer generation, releasing music by left-field artists like Beabadoobee and Rina Sawayama. With

MATTY WEARS VINTAGE SHIRT BY PRADA, VINTAGE TIE, MATTY'S OWN, TROUSERS BY LOUIS VUITTON, SHOES BY JOHN LOBB AND SUNGLASSES BY RAYBAN

The 1975's self-titled debut album, they were an immediate success thanks to Tumblr girls and Americans who never experienced 00s British indie and were amazed to hear that accent over bright and jangly, 80s-style songs made by musicians indebted to US emo music. As Oborne tells me, "Sometimes, working with artists, it's like pushing a fucking rock up a hill and other times it just has its own momentum. I feel like people just connected with something within the band's DNA and Matthew as the front person. And it just sort of spread."

The 1975 might break up, Healy told the press in the same interviews he announced were his last. That was true for a moment but not so any more. "There's always been a lot of 'will they, won't they' with my band. Will they split up? Will they not? Will I get over drugs in order...? And I've always leant into that because I like that. I love the drama of it," he grins from his sofa. "And I think that now I've realised, not in a non-sexy way, but The 1975 aren't going to split up. What happens with The 1975 could be a myriad of things, but splitting up is not really going to happen."

What makes Healy feel comfortable with the idea that The 1975 will always exist as a group of old friends making art is his realisation that he is a writer first and foremost. What he writes are not panoramic magnum opuses like Tolstoy – "*again,* not *comparing myself to Tolstoy*" – but snapshots of how he's feeling in the world at a given time. That takes the pressure off being in his band somehow.

So, here we are ushering in the new era of The 1975, in Matty Healy's stone home that feels like a Japanese monastery. This is the era – rather than it being self-aggrandising, Healy uses this term because his fans adopted it to refer to chapters of The 1975's career as they do with other pop stars – of embodying the fact that sincerity is scary, properly this time, rather than just singing and speaking about it. The era of vulnerability at the centre of his art and life. The era of no longer being a spokesperson of a generation. The era of being offline and of *being*, in general. The era of having fallen in love, for real, and writing a markedly sincere love album. The era of wondering, in love's aftermath, if true love exists at all, but hoping that it does.

ii.

ONCE YOU WALK THROUGH Healy's front door, you're faced with a sculpture that looks like a big boulder in his hallway. "I like really heavy weighted objects because they represent permanence," he explains, "because I tour so much; when I come back, the first thing I see is this immovable object."

Like everyone else, he was forced to be stationary by the pandemic. The mania of working on two albums in tandem – writing *Notes on a Conditional Form* by day and touring *A Brief Enquiry into Online Relationships* by night – came to an abrupt end. During lockdown he began training in jujutsu every day and reflected on himself and his own behaviour, as we all did. "I'm an addict, which is what I've realised defines all my behaviour," he says. "So, I'm not interested in being clever or being perceived as clever or I'm not a voracious reader. I'm not a voracious anything. I'm an addict." It wasn't far into 2020, then, before he started working on demos with Daniel that would become their fifth album.

Healy realised that The 1975 had taken the idea of being a band in the postmodern internet age far enough. *Notes* was a sprawling, 22-track, experimental album that reached for emo, UK garage, country, house and ambient music. It was existential, poignant, accomplished, a little self-indulgent and for a listener, honestly, exhausting. "I'm sure there are people that haven't finished *Notes*," Healy admits. For a band who had taken maximalism and experimentalism to such an extreme that it had become its own exoskeleton, The 1975 decided to do the most radical thing they could think of: just be a band again.

> *"I'm an addict, which I've realised defines all my behaviour. I'm not interested in being clever or being perceived as clever. I'm not a voracious anything"*

"The songs were written, and we went to a studio, and we produced them, and we recorded them. We've essentially not done that before, apart from the first album," explains Healy. "You can try and figure out what I mean without this sounding kind of pretentious or wanky, but it's kind of doing an impression of The 1975. Because as much as The 1975 has gone everywhere, kids know what The 1975 is, do you know what I mean?" They were no longer being clinical about music, a necessary component of creating the last two records. Some of these

MATTY WEARS VINTAGE SHIRT BY PRADA, VINTAGE TIE, MATTY'S OWN, TROUSERS BY LOUIS VUITTON, SHOES BY JOHN LOBB AND SUNGLASSES BY RAYBAN

songs were recorded in one or two takes. "I've always wanted to make something very, very intimate and something that allows you to be witness to a moment," Healy says. This intimacy taps into the collective consciousness, though, just as the forms of their previous albums were informed by culture of that year. It's reflective of oversharing fatigue, opinion fatigue, cynicism fatigue. It's stripping everything back and living simply, as we were forced to temporarily during the pandemic but, more crucially, that we long for in some elemental way now.

Ten years ago, Healy reflects, hearing a computer-generated noise on a track felt surprising and left you wondering how it was made. Now it doesn't register because anyone with basic programs can make those noises. "What people can't do," he says, counting each of these notables on his fingers, "is know how to use a studio, have been in a band for 20 years, have been writing songs and playing together for 20 years, and be able to go into a room and capture that. Like, hardly anyone can do that." This album was about returning to basic inarguable craft and skill. "It was about doing what you're good at. That's what I think people are really into now," Healy continues. He uses the example of watching an athlete running a race. "We're never going to get Christopher Nolan to direct the 100 metres to make it more interesting. Because it's someone doing something great and you just want to watch them do it. And I feel like we're getting to this era where we don't want to dress up quality experiences or quality that much."

With the aim of distillation, they recorded at Electric Lady in New York and Real World, Peter Gabriel's studio in Bath. Real World looks not unlike Healy's home: a lot of stone, natural materials, glass panels and built to include elements of light, air and water. Healy used to have a picture of its control room on his bedroom wall when he was growing up in Manchester. To deepen the approach, Jack Antonoff joined at a later date to co-produce the record with Healy and Daniel. "We had a series of conversations, and one of the things was about 'macho versus tough' where we wanted to make something that wasn't macho, but that felt quite tough and grown up and real," Healy says of working with Antonoff.

Back when their debut album was gaining traction, Daniel realised that one of the reasons their music was connecting with people was Healy's ability to make a listener or audience member feel personally addressed. "We really wanted to return to this and purify it on this record," Daniel writes over email.

The result is *being funny in a foreign language*. Its 11 tracks, including the usual self-titled 'state of the nation' opener they place at the beginning of all their records, make it their shortest album yet. The intention is that you can listen from front to back in one sitting. They're considering how to tour their *being funny* live show which will start in America in the autumn of 2022 and in the UK in early 2023. It will be "intimate" – that word again – and the polar opposite of the previous tour, which was in your face, explosive and information-heavy with LED messaging behind the band. "I want people to feel like they're in a little theatre as opposed to an IMAX because, you know, in an IMAX you can just go to the toilet," Healy says.

The idea of observing and being present for something has been so central to this project that it seeped through in ways Healy only realised on reflection. "When we've looked at all the pictures that were taken for this campaign, every single time we're looking at the camera we don't like it. And every photo where something is happening, or you're a witness to a moment, we're all going, 'That's it!'" he says. "Because that's what this record is. It's not didactic." To him, it's timeless. It took him five records but here he is with an album that sounds like an album.

> *"I've always been aware that I've been asking different questions on different records, but they are all questions about: Will you? Can I? Can we?"*

iii.

THE 1975 IS KNOWN FOR capturing the millennial experience, by proxy of social media and living online. But this is a band whose central concern has always been love. On the teenage drama of their debut, Healy is emphatically imploring 'Love me, love us!'; on later tracks (including one literally called 'Love Me'), they talk of being loved, and both loving and seeking love in drugs, sex and attention; from *Brief Inquiry* onwards they more directly explore everything in the current climate obstructing us from achieving and nurturing romantic love.

"I haven't thought about it like that, as the

MATTY WEARS COAT BY ANN DEMEULEMEESTER, SHIRT, MATTY'S OWN

common denominator being love itself in loads of different pursuits of it, but that is what it is," Healy says when I tell him this. "I've always been aware that I've been asking different questions on different records, but they *are* all questions about: *Will you? Can I? Can we?*"

This new album is a maturation of *Brief Inquiry*, which was the result of Healy reading David Foster Wallace and thinking about Wallace's cure for a cynical culture: sincerity. Now Healy is embodying the writer's ideals in his music rather than musing on them, and the result is more earnest than anyone might expect.

"This record definitely takes those ideas and says, 'Well, nihilism in your 20s is very sexy, and very cool and well done, and maybe appropriate.' As you get a little bit older, those postmodern, exciting ideas have to – do – start making way for more traditional values, which aren't that sexy, which aren't that hip-shaking. They're responsibility, adulthood,

"As you get a bit older, those postmodern, exciting ideas have to start making way for more traditional values which aren't that sexy. Responsibility, adulthood"

these kinds of ideas," Healy says. "What I'm asking on this record in the context of love is, can you find true love, versus all of this irony, all of this postmodernism, all of this... I don't want to say neoliberalism but versus the internet, versus technology? Can we find true love in a way that we were culturally in pursuit of at the beginning of the 20th century?" Well, can we find true love now? "I don't know," he says. "It's really hard."

Despite what Healy says, *being funny in a foreign language* seems to think we can find love, at least for a while. To him, the ability to be funny in a foreign language is the height of sophistication. It means you must have empathy and the will to be vulnerable and human by taking the risk of getting it wrong. "I think the record is about striving for all of these quite ephemeral goals: love, happiness, oneness," he says.

Musically and tonally, *being funny* is split in two: it starts as outward-looking, wry and analytical about finding love during the culture wars and becomes simplistic and clearly diaristic about his own romantic relationships. "I wanted to write about the culture war but also write about being in love and 'Yeah, fuck all that, let's kiss' or shit that's a bit cringe," Healy tells me. "Because I'm so bored of 'That's a really good take, bro.' Like, try saying something nice. It's really fucking hard."

A problem facing love at large is the idea that modern masculinity is in crisis. Mass shootings and violence appear on 'Looking For Somebody to Love', a dark and upbeat 80s-inspired song that could soundtrack a *Black Mirror* episode about what happens when a man can't convince a woman to date him. "*You've gotta show me how to push, if you don't want a shove are the words of a young man, already damned, looking for somebody to love*," Healy sings. The lighter side of a confused masculinity is echoed on the lead single, 'Part of the Band': "*I like my men like I like my coffee/Full of soy milk and so sweet it won't offend anybody*".

When we come to the topic of men, Healy calls for Oborne to spot him. "What do you need me to spot?" asks Oborne from the kitchen. "Just anything I say that's ridiculous," calls Healy, as he opens an enormous cigarette holder, and then to me: "This is a prop from a video, it's not how I hold my cigarettes."

We talk about the fact that we have violence and dangerous unchecked masculinity on the one hand and men full of soy milk and inoffensively bland on the other. What is a healthy demonstration of masculinity when young men are being radicalised into anti-feminist communities at an alarming rate? "I do know that the right wing is more successful with the acquiring of young men than the left is, and as somebody who's definitely on the left, it's interesting to watch, because the left don't seem to have [an] ideal masculinity, whereas the right have a very, very easy one," Healy says.

What grips the imaginations of these young men is a clear directive of traditional patriarchal ideals in the absence of anything else. Meanwhile, in mainstream pop culture, privileged men are praised by their stans, social media users and aggregate websites for wearing dresses, skirts or nail polish – empty signifiers when paired with a celebrity not speaking out on political issues related to gender and sexuality. "What is being a man for men who 'being a man' isn't some meta-performance piece about deconstruction?" asks Healy. "The only form of masculinity that is celebrated is one that deconstructs it. So: in a dress. I don't know what it is to be a man if you're not just deconstructing being a man and having that celebrated."

So far, so 1975. When the album becomes "soppy" and "goo-prone" and straightforward,

(OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT): MATTY WEARS SUIT BY DIOR, VINTAGE SHIRT BY RAF SIMONS AND VINTAGE BOOTS. MATTY'S OWN; MATTY WEARS VINTAGE SHIRT BY PRADA, VINTAGE TIE, MATTY'S OWN, TROUSERS BY LOUIS VUITTON, SHOES BY JOHN LOBB AND SUNGLASSES BY RAYBAN

it's surprising. Even Healy finds his songs so un-cynical that he almost winces hearing them in the context of the full album. On 'All I Need to Hear', a quiet ballad with an electric guitar, piano and strings, he sings to the love of his life: "*tell me you love me, 'cos that's all that I need to hear*". The conclusion on the final country-inspired track ('When We Are Together') is that, "*the only time I feel it might get better is when we are together*".

It's not sanitised romance in these latter songs, though; there's some faded glamour and peaceful realism to the everyday anecdotes. "Everyone is disappointing once you get to know them. Me included, life included," Healy says, quoting Charlie Kaufman's film, *Synecdoche New York*. "Romantic relationships are the one thing that I don't think Einstein could have ever written a thesis on that would have helped anybody. It's so difficult."

I ask him if he's read the heteronormative and slightly outdated book *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm, one of my favourites about relationships. He hasn't, so I explain its general thesis: that love is not a feeling but something to practise, requiring discipline, commitment and attention. "Maybe they just had a really rough bird and they just had to write this book," Healy says. He performs amusingly as Fromm: "'*No, it'll be fine. It'll be fine. She's nice. She's nice.*'"

He's joking but agrees with Fromm in theory: love is about maintenance and commitment. As he typically does, Healy brings this idea back to music. "Inspiration doesn't come looking for you. Love doesn't come looking for you. You have to turn up every day and catch it," he says. "I'll go to the studio and it'll be dull for four hours. It'll be the same keyboard sound, the same keyboard sound, but then accidentally someone knocks an oscillator and it does something interesting. And I go, 'Oh, what's that?' And now you're off and you're creative, and you're alive. So, it's about turning up every day and allowing it to happen. Because if you don't turn up, nothing's gonna happen."

Above Healy's head as he speaks is a black square canvas affixed to the wall. It's his favourite painting in the world, by a man called Hisashi Indo. "He was a civil engineer who missed the train to Hiroshima and all his mates went and the bomb went off," Healy explains. "He didn't know how to deal with that experience. And he didn't want to be a civil engineer any more, so he would, in his back garden every day, in this symbolic ritual, use this deep-purple lacquer. He'd do one screen print over and he would do that every day for a year. Eventually, it just turns black. After a year of just one action that is a representation of his grief, it becomes a metaphor of a painting. Because it isn't a painting, but it *fucking is*. So it's a paradox and it comes from... well, fucking hell, where does that come from?"

iv.

MATTY HEALY HAS SOMETHING called The Room in his house. It's filled with oddities from a storage container that he's not got around to organising yet. The reason he let me see inside the "nightmare" is because he mentioned he had some esoterica that's "pretty fucking out-there" and obviously I needed to see it. He gives me a hand as I hesitate in stepping over the miscellaneous items that cover the floor. There's enough chaos to feel almost embarrassed to look in front of the person who created it, but if they weren't there, you'd be like a PhD student at

the British Library, poring through its contents for hours.

To list some of Healy's cultural artefacts explains his world view – and at the very least, it's a nod to the many Easter eggs he leaves hidden in his work, ones that The 1975 fans successfully uncover with each release. He has Daniel Johnston original cassettes; a poem by Jack Kerouac on the poet Arthur Rimbaud, who is name-checked in 'Part of the Band' ("raunchy stuff in here as well," he comments, pointing to some lines); a William Burroughs shotgun art arrest card; a postcard that was sent to fans of industrial music pioneers Throbbing Gristle in 1981 to inform them of their break-up.

My favourite is his original press release for *Infinite Jest*, tucked inside a copy of Wallace's short-story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. I tell him that reading the story 'On His Deathbed', in which a man describes the son he has always hated and the son's mother who was "reduced and remade" by the boy, nearly put me off having kids for life. "There are so many films or pieces of literature that fucking just terrified me about real life," Healy says. He wants kids, at some point: "I'm all right, I'll be fine. It's about money, really, babies, isn't it?"

One of his favourite items is a pamphlet from the 60s by activist Abbie Hoffman called *Fuck the System*. It details how to live outside the law in New York: how to get free food, accommodation, lawyers, drugs. Healy was a teenage punk, influenced by the fact his dad came from a mining community devastated by Thatcher's leadership. "The ethos of punk would be so demonised by the left if the Sex Pistols or something legit like that happened right now," he says, holding the pink pamphlet in both hands. "When I reflect on all of these things that I've collected since I was a kid, that for me have represented true counterculture and progression, I feel a bit politically homeless, because I don't know how those things would be embraced."

I suppose there's a question that some reading this will be wondering about. "What I'm not moving into is my 'anti-woke' era," Healy assures me. Never has he tried to maintain a good liberal position because it's popular to do so, he says, though that has been assumed by detractors in the past few years. "What did I do?" he says, counting each statement on his fingers again: I said, be nice to gay people, be nice to Black people, let's save the planet and organised religion is a net bad.

He brings up Twitter, which he says he left in 2020 because he wanted to comment on the culture war, not be a part of it ("I'm not representative of anything political," he remarks). Though he continues to embrace YouTube and learning online, phones and social media are generally regarded as a burden. If you want a relatable moment in this profile, it's this: at one point, he looks out to the Japanese garden that's exposed to the sky and says, "I'm getting a raven, mate. Write with a quill, send it out there."

What these sorts of often-repetitive minor "cancellations" mean for artists like Healy is ambiguous (he left Twitter but is frontman of the biggest cult band in the world and co-creator of one of the most anticipated releases of the year). Rather than have tangible impacts on their careers, it would appear that these micro-dramas mostly cause artists anxiety and stress. Healy, the king of being soft-cancelled, is now someone young musicians reach out to when they experience a public scolding. "I've almost got this big brother –not Orwellian, *actual* big brother – relationship with them because I am one of their peers," he says, adding that, "My phone's like Samaritans if you're getting cancelled." He realised on reflection that on *being funny*, there's more cancellation content than he'd intended. "I think there's three lines about being cancelled, and I've started thinking, 'Fuck, I don't really care that much about the cancelling.' I'm not worried about that; it's just a funny thing," he says.

It's increasingly hard to care about the smaller moral slights made by public figures when the larger ones by people with legislative power are so egregious and unpunished. We have a need for bad guys online, Healy believes, because we are all the main character, performing for our audiences, and main characters are nearly always inherently good.

"I probably couldn't even give you an example right now [who] one of those bad guys in the past year is because we don't care," Healy says. "Whatever morally impassé thing this person has done, we genuinely don't care about it. All we really want to do is perform our goodness." He uses the recent news story about the musician Lizzo using an ableist slur in a new track and the discourse around that as an example. "Nobody was sat at home with their partner coming over to them going 'Babe, you OK?' And them going, '...It's just this Lizzo thing.' You know, that's *never* happened. It doesn't happen. People don't care like that. And we shouldn't pretend that we can have the ability to care about everything." There's probably a bad faith reading of what he's said, stripped of context and without me agreeing and smiling while thinking about the 'babe, you OK' meme, but he's not wrong.

MATTY WEARS BLAZER BY LOUIS VUITTON, VINTAGE JUMPER BY HELMUT LANG, VINTAGE SHIRT BY PRADA AND VINTAGE TIE, MATTY'S OWN

What we do actually care about, Healy says, is love. It is the people in our lives, the ways they emotionally move us, the person we come home to every night.

v.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Matty Healy is born again. He's softer and composed over a video call when he shows me that he's on the sofa underneath the grief art, exactly as he was before. He doesn't couch his phrasing in stage directions. There's no one to spot him.

He's spent the time since we met thinking about how being "Daddy Healy" on tour will be tough. "When I was, like, 24, 25, everything I did was so fuelled by the bloom of youth, and I don't say that to make myself sound old, but I used to not put a lot of work into what I did and everything I did naturally," he says of performing on tour. "And now everything I do is... well, I mean, look at my breakfast." He holds up a meal fit for Pingu: a fish on a white plate, nothing more.

"Regardless of algorithms and Twitter and all this bullshit, the amount of love and the desire to replicate beauty is so potent. It almost doesn't make sense when the universe is designed towards decay"

Now we're edging closer to the release of *being funny*, how does he feel about the prospect of releasing something more vulnerable and personally exposing? There's a gear shift as he eats the mackerel. "Good! Yeah, *too fucking right!* I mean, I'm not scared any more, do you know what I mean?" he says, and pauses after a faintly performative mouthful. "Like, well, hold on... Why am I saying that, so, like, aggy?" I had noticed, too. Maybe because you are scared, I offer. He claims he just hadn't thought about it yet – and did I really think it's more vulnerable than his previous work?

It is – I point to the 2018 ballad 'Be My Mistake', an unguarded acoustic song about cheating and finding comfort in sex and love. It could happily exist on this album but stuck out as different on *Brief Inquiry*. He agrees, which is comforting to him because 'Be My Mistake' doesn't make him feel vulnerable but connected. Someone once told him to read the comment section of that song's video: it's like a Reddit thread of people no longer talking about the song itself but about their experiences of cheating, love and loss. "It's the one thing that makes me as religious as I'll allow myself to get comfortable with," he says of this and of our impulse to connect through art. "There's just too much love in everything. Regardless of algorithms and Twitter and all this bullshit that we talk about, the amount of love and the desire to replicate beauty is so potent. It almost doesn't make sense when the universe is designed towards decay."

In our previous conversation, Healy was uncertain if true love exists, but here he is, I say, talking about the communal love we all experience through music, regardless of the presence of romantic love in our lives. Isn't that true love, too?

"100 per cent," Healy says. "Sometimes you can stand on stage in front of 10,000 people, and not in your life at that time have a potent individual love. You don't have a partner – which everyone wants, especially at night, which is coming in an hour, in the hotel room by myself. Someone shouts, 'I love you, Matty' and your heart goes, 'No, you don't.' And you almost resent the crowd in front of you. And that's that thing that you do in your 20s because you're romantic and everything's about your boyfriend or your girlfriend. It doesn't matter if there's 10,000 people there. I've realised that that [love] is as beautiful and rewarding if you're mindful, if you're not in search of all loves at once. I've had to stop being in search of all drugs at once, all experience at once, all love at once."

He's had two years of practising restraint during the pandemic and had just started to get better at existing in the moment on stage last year. "I think what I'm talking about is just not taking things for granted any more," he continues. "Because, like you say, the pandemic or this newfound connection with each other, is this realisation of what true love is."

So, this is the era of valuing every face in the crowd; the era of "appreciating everything in that room instead of intoxicating myself, overreaching emotionally for everything".

"If I have that in my mind – let's get the love going in a non-hippie dippie way – I think that'd be a really nice era for The 1975," Healy concludes. He notes the simple way the band decided to relaunch their socials and start to tease new material. "I'm still making jokes, but we were like, 'What are we going to say? We're not going to say something fucking dry. And we're not going to do something abstract and "cool".' We're gonna fucking be like: 'Hey, guys. Thank you so much. How fun is it to do this? We love you.'" ®

MAKEUP: ELAINE LYNSKEY; HAIR: MATT MULHALL C/O PAULA JENNER @ STREETERS; PHOTO ASSISTANT: STEPHEN ELWYN SMITH; STYLING ASSISTANTS: NELIMA ODHIAMBO & RAFAELA RONCETE; LIGHTING ASSISTANTS: KIRAN MANE & EMILIO GARFATH; STUDIO ASSISTANT: OAK MCMAHON

MATTY WEARS SUIT BY DIOR, VINTAGE SHIRT BY RAF SIMONS, VINTAGE BOOTS, MATTY'S OWN

THIS PAGE: BEA WEARS JACKET BY LOUIS VUITTON, NECKLACE BY THE KOOPLES, EARRINGS BY SWAROVSKI; OPPOSITE: BEA WEARS BLAZER AND SKIRT BY PARIAH, T-SHIRT BY SAM MIRO AT END., CORSET BY DION LEE AT END., SOCKS BY SOCKSHOP, SHOES BY UGG, EARRINGS BY SWAROVSKI

RETURN *to* BEATOPIA

At the age of seven, Bea Laus — aka beabadoobee — dreamed up an imaginary world: Beatopia. Having made her name in mall rock at just 17, beabadoobee's second album sees a return to her childhood construct while unveiling a new, more mature, sound. As *Beatopia* is released, she throws open the doors to her inner universe and shows Rolling Stone UK around

BY **LAUREN O'NEILL**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MARK CANT**

FASHION BY **SACHA DANCE**

"THERE'S FAIRIES AND MONSTERS AND ALL THE FOOD YOU WANT"

Bea Laus is taking me on a metaphorical trip. Specifically, to "a place where everyone's in gilded, 1800s garments and crazy attire, and there's fairies and crazy monsters and all the food you can want. And no boys. Everyone's in crazy dresses."

Let the picture form in your mind, too. Go on. Close your eyes. The air smells like lavender and you're probably wearing a ruff. Got it? Good. You've reached Beatopia, the inner world conjured up by Laus – who is better known as beabadoobee, already one of her generation's most iconoclastic British musicians – when she was seven. Now 22, that childhood spirit has been resurrected to inform her sweet, smart and frequently surprising second album, *Beatopia*.

When we meet at her Rolling Stone UK shoot in mid-May, however, Laus is firmly ensconced in reality. At a studio in east London, she cheerfully details her ridiculously packed calendar for the foreseeable future here on planet Earth: today is promo, tomorrow she's filming some performances of her new songs, and soon after, the beabadoobee band will take a support slot on Halsey's US tour.

As Laus chats, using Spotify on my phone to remember the name of a band she wants to talk about (Minus the Bear), she details the pros and cons of touring. (Con: she literally just got back from a run of American dates around her Coachella appearances. Pro: PinkPantheress, her friend and *Beatopia* collaborator, will be on the road with her this time; plus, "Every time you support a big artist, they just take care of you. There's catering," she says with a grin.) As we talk, she trains an expert eye over her reflection in the mirror of the glam station where we're sitting. Assessing her hair and makeup – the eyeshadow should be winged out "just so", the base concealer simple and light, and her under eyes dark, because she likes to "look tired" – the Philippines-born musician wants to ensure the integrity of the Beatopia aesthetic. The clothes for today's photographs are monochrome with hints of red. Along with the music itself, the look Laus is pursuing feels more grown-up than the grungy, Y2K sound and style she was known for in her younger years.

Indeed, until she started to share the music and visuals from *Beatopia*, beabadoobee was fairly exclusively thought of as one of the princesses of contemporary pop-punk. Between 2018 and 2019, she put out four EPs – *Lice*, *Patched Up*, *Loveworm*, and *Space Cadet* – on Dirty Hit, with whom she'd signed after catching the attention of multiple labels when her acoustic bedroom pop song, 'Coffee', written aged 17, unexpectedly went viral. (Laus chose to sign with Dirty Hit, she told me during an interview years ago, because of her love for its biggest act, The 1975. She now counts the band among her peers and co-writers.) Across those releases, her songwriting developed away from its cute, quietly observational beginnings,

BEA WEARS BLAZER AND SKIRT BY PARIAH, T-SHIRT BY SAM MIRO AT END., CORSET BY DION LEE AT END., SOCKS BY SOCKSHOP, SHOES BY UGG, EARRINGS BY SWAROVSKI

BEA WEARS BRA BY GOSSARD, BLAZER BY FENG CHEN WANG, SKIRT BY VETEMENTS AT END., SOCKS BY SOCKSHOP, SHOES BY VAGABOND, NECKLACE BY SWAROVSKI, EARRINGS BY THE KOOPLES

and into the riptide, electric guitar pop-punk which came to define her first album, *Fake It Flowers*, released in October 2020.

That record was written, "just after doing an arena tour with The 1975. I was like, 'I wanna make music that can fill this arena.'" Certainly, she met her own brief: *Fake It Flowers* is full of what she calls "pop-rock bangers", inspired largely by guitar bands like The Cardigans and The Smashing Pumpkins. At the beginning of 2020, she'd been shortlisted for the BBC's Sound of 2020 poll and the BRITs' Rising Star award. In the final chapter of her ascendancy, *Fake It Flowers* cemented her place as a bonafide talent, with both critics and her adoring fanbase. Looking back, the album feels like it played a part in the stirrings of a major trend towards 90s and 00s revivalism among Gen Z more generally. For Laus, however, who was 19 when she was working on the album and had only just turned 20 when it came out, the whole thing was kind of a teenage phase.

"After *Fake It Flowers*, a lot of the pop-punk and Y2K [genre] got so big, but it was weird because I completely grew out of it whilst I was doing the press. I think that genre-wise, it was almost kind of forced," she says of her debut. "So, everyone else was doing it and I was kind of getting cringed out by everything. I love the record and I love playing those songs, but it represents 19-year-old Bea, and it does feel very different to who I am now."

Indeed, the album that Laus will release on 15 July is a new prospect altogether. It maintains a little of the *Fake It Flowers* bite (she describes first single 'Talk', for example, as a "cousin" to her previous output), but largely, *Beatopia* sees the beabadoobee project traversing new sonic planes. Featuring experimentation which pings around like a pinball from Nelly Furtado and Gabrielle-inspired R&B ('Sunny Day') to simple balladry ('Lovesong') via nods to bossa nova, Filipino OPM and even midwest emo, the album is a wide-ranging statement of self, crafted by an artist who very clearly loves music in so many of its forms, and couldn't possibly contain that solely within her established brand of mall rock – no matter how good at it she may be.

Made over the course of a year, beginning in February 2021, *Beatopia* is the product of a lot of soul-searching. "I was feeling quite lost after *Fake It Flowers*," says Laus. "I didn't know what type of musician I was meant to be, and it was almost like I was creating music for other people and not myself." Covid-related disruptions to tour schedules had meant that she didn't really have a

"I LOVE *FAKE IT FLOWERS* AND THOSE SONGS, BUT IT REPRESENTS 19-YEAR-OLD BEA. IT DOES FEEL VERY DIFFERENT TO WHO I AM NOW"

THIS PAGE: BEA WEARS DRESS BY AMBUSH AT FLANNELS, GLOVES BY ANNA OCTOBER, SOCKS BY SOCKSHOP, SHOES BY STELLA MCCARTNEY, EARRINGS BY THE KOOPLES; OPPOSITE: BEA WEARS JACKET BY LOUIS VUITTON, NECKLACE BY THE KOOPLES, EARRINGS BY SWAROVSKI

sense of how her fans felt about the record in real-world terms. In some ways this was confusing, but in others it was liberating: she "finally felt [I had] enough freedom to do whatever I wanted".

The major change that allowed Laus to embrace her musicianship more fully was her extremely close friendship with the album's co-writer and co-producer, Jacob Bugden, who she met during the making of *Fake It Flowers*, when he started playing session guitar for her. (She also hired Bugden to play in her live band, initially because she "had envisioned a shaved head in my band", to the point where she had previously threatened her much-loved bassist Eliana Sewell with the clippers.) Soon, the two musicians discovered that they had similar tastes and aspirations in terms of where her project was going to go.

"I think we both had the same kinds of feelings towards *Fake It Flowers*," Bugden explains when we speak a few weeks later via a FaceTime call from sunny Atlanta, Georgia – one of the stops on the Halsey tour. "It was a bit too immature, and it wasn't as encompassing of her personality as it could have been."

As a result, they started writing together, and after a highly productive week during which they worked on 'Fairy Song', '10:36', 'Tinkerbell Is Overrated', and 'Talk' – four of the tracks that appear on *Beatopia* – they began making the album in earnest. For weeks at a time, they'd hole up in a studio in Wandsworth, south-west London, smoking weed and deciding which noises they wanted to make each day: sometimes they were inspired by a specific demo recording of 'Maps' by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs; at others they'd try to recreate the way Arab Strap combined electronic drums with acoustic guitars.

"I was just like, 'Sick! We're just going to get high and make music,'" Laus says, laughing at the memory.

The experience of creating *Beatopia* with Bugden proved to be revelatory, especially because Laus had found studio collaboration tough in the past. "I'm still trying to grow into myself, but back then I was still figuring a lot of stuff out and that took a massive toll on my opinions and decisions, and I was very easily influenced. It took a bit to admit that, but honestly, I think it is just a part of growing up," Laus says. Making the record with her "best friend", however, couldn't have been more different. "We understand each other so well, so much to the point that when it comes to music, it fits perfectly, like puzzle pieces," she adds. As if to illustrate this, Bugden tells me an uncanny story during our call.

Worse for wear at the end of the session where they'd made the album's trippy, Beatles-in-their-LSD-era intro 'Beatopia Cultsong' – "we got fucked" he recalls fondly – he picked up a guitar and absently started playing the riff that resulted in the *Beatopia* track 'The Perfect Pair'. "And Bea just sang it, the whole first verse, just there," he says, the amazement on his face still clear on the screen of a phone with middling-to-shit reception. "I've got the voice note still; I listen to it all the time. It was the first thing I played on the guitar, and the first thing she sang, and the song was just made there. It was literally out of nowhere." Their working relationship, he says, is "something very magical". For Laus's part, she tells me simply that she hopes to make music with Bugden for the rest of her life.

Of course, other collaborators helped assemble the eclectic landscape of *Beatopia*. Matty Healy, with whom Laus also made the 2021 EP *Our Extended Play*, alongside the other members of The 1975, appears on the twinkly, American Football-adjacent track 'Pictures of Us'. The song began life as Healy's own song, written initially with Bugden, but was subsumed by Laus, who accepted it greedily when it was offered to her later, though she changed

"SICK! WE'RE JUST GOING TO GET HIGH AND MAKE MUSIC!"

some aspects. Elsewhere, PinkPantheress – the soft-voiced creator of catchy but intricate sonic worlds, and therefore a natural musical bedfellow for beabadoobee – contributed to 'Tinkerbell Is Overrated', while Jockstrap and Black Country, New Road's Georgia Ellery plays strings that swell in your chest across the album.

Beatopia, however, isn't just about the sounds: it's just as much a new visual identity for beabadoobee as it is a sonic one. Gone are the cargo pants and Punkyfish garb, and in their place are Stella McCartney, Sunnei and Louboutins. The album artwork, by tattoo artist Shabalaparabala (from whom Laus and Bugden recently got their Beatopia tattoos) is self-consciously childlike, to capture the album's origins in seven-year-old Laus's brain, and the music videos by and large are simple and crisp, directed by Luke Casey and Alexandra Leese.

The visual for 'Talk', which references clips by Papa Roach and Limp Bizkit with its fisheye camera and crowd of fans, Laus says with some delight, has wound up some "old men" on the internet. ("Just your classic, like, 'Why is she trying to be Limp Bizkit?' Every time I get a hate comment from old men, it's like, 'It's because you want to do it. You're just angry that I'm doing it,'" she eye-rolls comically from under long, thick lashes.) Meanwhile, the clip for 'See You Soon' is in black and white, and includes the Thai short film *Mobile Men*, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, among its touchstones.

Indeed, 'See You Soon', a song written immediately after Laus's first trip on mushrooms, is, she says, "the single out of all the singles that describes the world of Beatopia and what I want to be as an artist, the aesthetic of it." In the music video, she's filmed in the countryside as the natural scenery flies past her, replicating the enlightenment of her psychedelic experience. "I don't owe this record to 'shrooms or whatever, but I was like, 'I actually trust myself to do these psychedelics' and knew that I was strong enough to get through it and be OK at the other end," she says now.

It's a similar type of self-assurance that encouraged Laus to revisit Beatopia in the first place. For years, she had buried the concept deep after a teacher at her primary school found a map she'd drawn of the dream world, stuck it up for the rest of her class to see, and laughed at what she'd made. These days, her concept of Beatopia, unearthed and unlocked, is less literal, and more a symbol for her new-found refusal to carry around trauma or shame.

"The misconception people have with *Beatopia* is that it's a conceptual record. As much as it was when I was seven, and as much as it is if you want to think about it the fun way, I feel like it's something I had to dig in and find within myself," she explains. "I was coming to terms with a lot of family trauma when I was a kid, and that came hand in hand with the fact that I moved to London when I was three and my parents were very unfamiliar with this country. Then high school happened, and I was the only Asian kid in school – it was predominantly white – and it was really hard to fit in. I felt like an alien. I always blamed my past for my mistakes, and I beat myself up so much, but sometimes mistakes have to be made to learn a lot of things."

The result of coming to terms with all of that, Laus says, is *Beatopia*, a sparkling ode to the universe inside her, with all its reckless impulses and colour and, apparently, fairies. It is an assertion of defiance and of personal growth in every possible direction. "Everyone has a Beatopia inside them. Beatopia was something I had to hide away – it just took time to rediscover it and to accept it," she explains, as the final touches are made before she's ready for her debut Rolling Stone UK shoot. She is smiling at herself in the mirror as she talks, and she looks pleased with what she sees. ®

BEA WEARS DRESS BY AMBUSH AT FLANNELS, GLOVES BY ANNA OCTOBER, EARRINGS BY THE KOOPLES. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY SOPHIE COX; FASHION ASSISTANT: DOUGLAS MILLER

A Universal Truth

Dermot Kennedy wants to be as famous as his idols but is determined to keep his personal life private. In a saturated white male, singer-songwriter market, is being an Everyman a recipe for success? With poignant lyrics and delicate storytelling, the Irish musician is proving it can happen

By **Hannah Ewens**
Photography by **Jesse DeFlorio**

IMPOSING
Kennedy surveys the expanse of Lough Tay

B

OOTS AND SOCKS ARE taken off slowly and with a sense of purpose. Dermot Kennedy, who arrived home yesterday from New York, where he was working on his second album, once heard that touching your bare feet on the ground beneath you is a cure for jetlag.

We're on the hilltop above Lough Tay – better known to Dubliners as Guinness Lake – surrounded by miles of burnt grass and tall thickets of trees that look like they belong in *Twilight*. "The earth – it's like magic," he says, when his skin meets the grass. "I don't know if it's true or not, mind."

Kennedy came here semi-frequently as a child, but visiting now as an adult, this steep drop into an expanse of water makes him feel small and that his career isn't so important. These moments are grounding for a man determined to be as prominent as his musical icons Bon Iver and Kendrick Lamar.

The singer-songwriter is known in the UK and overseas for his radio hits 'Outnumbered' and 'Giants', but here in Ireland he's practically a national treasure. When we met at a golf club an hour's drive from the lake, the barmaid was incredulous that Kennedy would come in here. He's late, though – his manager says he doesn't understand urgency. When he's told something is a matter of priority, he'll say, "All right" and be back half an hour later – which gives the staff time to gossip. When he does arrive and we're about to leave, the barmaid runs across the tarmac in her heels and asks for a photo with him because her kids love him (she undoubtedly feels the same, punching the air as she returns to work after meeting the Channing Tatum lookalike with a grainy voice).

"I definitely had to work hard to get out of my own way. Because if the lyrics are the most special thing I do, you can go crazy, like sitting in cafes trying to *be* a writer"

Connecting with people is increasingly Kennedy's primary motivation. His first album, *Without Fear*, released in 2019, was a collection of tracks written over a decade spent at school, university and busking in Dublin. They were created just for him, rather than as part of any masterplan to win fame. When his hit 'Better Days' came out during last summer's ongoing Covid restrictions, its simple lyrics about existing in dark times that soon give way to something brighter took on their own meaning for listeners: the song became about the pandemic. He realised then that he speaks to people through his songs; that songwriting is more than sitting at his piano in tears, his heart in his hands. His second album – due for release in September – has been written quickly and with his audience front of mind.

The pace demanded by the music industry is clearly a point of contention for him. He says of following up a debut, "If you think about it like a movie, it has an ending. And then someone is like, 'No, do more, do more of that.' Well, that makes no sense." The requirement for songs to be three minutes long for streaming services makes him feel queasy. But he's so ambitious that he concerns himself with marketing buzzwords like visibility, impact and growth. ("Until the second album comes out, you feel like you're just slipping or fading slightly, whether that's rational or irrational.")

To hear a few bars of one of his singles on the radio, you could mistake him for someone else. But the lyrics are poetic and succinctly capture timeless emotions. Even when he's singing about making out by a lake in 'Kiss Me', a song that sounds like he's trying to capture *The Notebook* in 3:49 minutes, it's well conceived and executed in a way that commands respect from the most cynical listener. His music is about life's big three – love, loss and being present – and although it encompasses the easy blend of folk and hip-hop that British and Irish people have embraced en masse for a couple of decades, there's something unique in the way he grasps for truth. They're the sort of universal songs specific enough to feel that he is speaking to you, but whose lyrics are subtle enough to apply to multiple situations you've found yourself in; it's music that's chosen by a couple for their first dance or by their loved ones at their wake.

He's been called the Irish Ed Sheeran and Rag'n'Bone Man by critics, but Dermot Kennedy is a distinctly different artist. Where Sheeran has started evoking vampires and Bronski Beat and Rag'n'Bone Man never stepped out of the shadow of his ubiquitous and drab 'Human', Kennedy has crept in quietly through the back door and into the UK charts, commanding that you listen in and feel.

"There's so many people trying to do what I do: I'm a white, male singer-songwriter with a guitar, you know what I mean?" he admits. "That is not a unique concept and so I'm trying to be different." Knowing that his lyrics are part of his appeal, he

pays special attention to them. "I definitely had to work hard to get out of my own way. Because if the lyrics are the most special thing I do, you can go crazy, like sitting in cafes trying to *be* a writer."

Plenty of his contemporaries' music is too generic – there is a coterie of chart-topping musicians similar to Sheeran and Rag'n'Bone Man whose music exists to appear on gym playlists and *Love Island* – and Kennedy believes this more than anyone. "If you're lucky enough to work in the world of art and culture, it's such a waste of

DERMOT KENNEDY

“I’m happy to share vulnerable parts of myself, but I’m not happy to use certain parts of my life and memory to fast-forward my career. I’d like to think you get rewarded by the universe if you hold on to certain things and just put all your heart into the art you make”

everyone's time if you're just going through the motions," he reflects. "That's why I listen to hip hop all the time; there's sincere emotion in it." That also goes for performing, as he forces himself to relive those emotions: "Even when I'm on stage, I'm only thinking about the past and the future and what you wish it could be. You spend so little time present as a musician, which is nuts to me."

His most successful songs to date are more on the nose and relatable but they are at risk of Kennedy turning his back on them. It's unlikely 'Giants' will appear on setlists again: "I don't know how much I love it, but it is reassuring to me to know there are lyrics in it like '*And my hand fit in yours / Like a bird would find the breeze*.'" He doesn't mind trying to construct obvious hits – he considers it part of the game he must play – but understands that people will judge that impulse. "Being a creative and an artist, there are a lot of words that seem scary or taboo almost: 'accessible' or 'commercial'. For me, the word I've come across that doesn't feel so bad is 'direct'," he explains.

The reason he will try to speak to the broadest audience possible is because he wants to be known. In the same breath, he is private and will look away while answering a question that could reveal something personal – like where he stayed during the pandemic, for example.

How does he balance his professional desire to differentiate himself from those other white, male singer-songwriters and his need to reject a personal and more intimate narrative? "I've always been resistant to the idea of celebrity," he says, taking time to mull this over, though I sense he's already given it a lot of consideration. "There's certain things I know I could let go, even in interviews in the past, that would add to my story and things I know would be beneficial to my career. But I think of all the people in my life. If they were to read it, they'd be like, 'Interesting, I thought that was just a thing between us.' I can't... because what's it worth, you know? You can't give that stuff up."

OF LATE, LIFE HAS FELT too easy for Kennedy. Last year he took a road trip across North America because his everyday experience had become too smooth, too sanitised. "It got to a point where every place I stayed in was quite nice. Every studio I was in was really good. Everything was 'quite nice'. And I was like, 'This isn't interesting.' I just took this trip because I wanted to have to go out to the car at, like, three o'clock in the morning in Utah and not know if there's snakes, you know what I mean?" He laughs and adds: "Just something, some kind of excitement."

This extravagance is still new for him – his 'authentic' route to music through hard work and busking is a romantic origin story. Growing up as a child in Dublin, music was a passion. Perhaps unusual for a young boy, he gravitated towards the love songs of Everyman acoustic singer-songwriters Damien Rice and David Gray (in Ireland, Gray's 1998 *White Ladder* remains the best-selling album of all time by quite a measure). From the age of 10 or 11, he learnt guitar and would sit at his parents' piano and write for hours – sometimes the magic would show up, and sometimes it wouldn't, but there'd be no agonising about that. He just knew it felt good and warm to write words and sing them.

"Even to this day, it's hard for me to write when I know that someone is in the room, no matter how much I know them, no matter how much time they give me, it's just hard for that *pure* part of my brain to come out," he confides.

His obsession, though, was football. He played

seriously, told by adults that his future lay in the Premiership. This took the pressure off making music – he always thought he'd be a footballer and have music as a hobby.

Living this double life as one of the lads and an emotional teenage songwriter never caused him trouble. "There wasn't much for people to take the piss out of because all I was doing was making songs," he says of his football friends. "Don't get me wrong, like, I definitely separated the two. There was one time in the football dresser where they were like, 'What do you write songs about?' And I was like, 'Not in here, I'm not doing this.'"

Football is still an important part of his life – for the past few months spent in New York he was playing regularly for a team. "It gives me a clarity of mind that I just don't get from anything else, even music," he says. "You know, the way some people say they feel just so free on stage and feel weightless? I get that playing football." There's something meditative about it. I mention Haruki Murakami's memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, in which the Japanese novelist explains his daily practice of long-distance jogging to clear out his mind before writing. Kennedy has read it and espouses that artists need to have time without distractions or art, and phones, in particular. "When I put my phone away for a day or two, I can feel my brain going back to the way it was when I was 18, your mind finds that natural rhythm," he says, noting that even though he knows it's wrong, his jealousy of other artists is stoked through social media use.

At 17, Kennedy finished school and reluctantly went to Maynooth College to study classical music; it was mostly a back-up plan to appease his parents. He was already busking on Dublin's Grafton Street and playing bars in town: his dad would have to take him to open-mic nights and plead his case at the door, promising staff he'd not drink. The local gigging continued throughout his early to mid-twenties. He avoided industry offers or taking on a manager, though the interest was there.

"My advice to younger people is, just be so careful who you trust and what direction you go because you need to know who you are as an artist," he says. "Everything will try and steer you away from it. You have to be so fucking solid in the creative vision that you have. And I was lucky enough to have that, partly because no one cared for so long and I had to be patient. From when I started playing in the street till now is, like, 14 years."

His luck changed quickly and without warning. Despite the scrutiny currently placed on streaming services and their low payment to artists, Kennedy was one of the system's winners. His intricate piano ballad – and arguably most special song to date – 'An Evening I Will Not Forget' was selected by Spotify's algorithm Discover Weekly. He was at a show he put on for himself at Servant

STYLIST: RICHARD SLOAN

Jazz Quarters in London the day this happened. “A bunch of people came up to me and said they’d bought tickets that day because they’d heard my song on Spotify,” he remembers. “I was already hooked on checking my amount of listens every day and so I went on Spotify, and I think I’d gone from 10 listens a day to 50,000 because of this Discover Weekly playlist. I organised a meeting with Spotify and other people by myself. I really did grab that moment.”

Shortly afterwards, he had tens of thousands of pounds in his bank account which allowed him to be selective about who he would work with. He ended up signing with Universal because he felt they supported his vision. “You gotta be careful with this stuff. You go above all the label bosses and it’s ultimately shareholders, right? You’ve got to be conscious of the fact that you are a product in that world. Certain people will not care how you feel and don’t have certain amounts of patience,” he says, pragmatically.

It often feels in this political economy that there’s little in place to support art being made. “Ireland has a very healthy music scene but during the pandemic it was ignored badly,” Kennedy notes. “As a country, we love talking about it and celebrating Van Morrison and Bono. Cool, if you want that to happen again, we really need to nurture that.”

Of Ireland’s newer musicians, fellow Irish musician David Balfe is someone Kennedy would like to collaborate with. Balfe’s 2021 self-titled project, *For Those I Love*, about his friend’s suicide and the process of grieving for him, was named Rolling Stone UK’s best album of that year and recently scooped the Album of the Year award at Ireland’s Choice Music Prize. “I’m drawn to someone doing something as authentic as that and someone as reluctant as that to chase fame,” says Kennedy. “I think those are the things that should win, in a strange way.”

KENNEDY’S LOCAL PUB is an old, ivy-covered establishment filled with oil paintings, wooden panels and pewter tankards. Kennedy’s mother and father, John and Eileen, stroll peacefully in 15 minutes or so after our interview has finished.

Being around his parents makes their qualities appear clearly in him: he too is unassuming and quiet but also frequently amusing or amused. Family is of paramount importance to him, so he intends to keep Ireland as his base forever. He recently purchased his first house nearby and his parents have helped to renovate it. Apparently, he dreams of leaving music behind, buying this pub and becoming its landlord – although his parents weren’t supposed to tell me that. Being away has made him reassess how significant this area is to him. Taking over the pub would mean having his feet in the grass in a permanent way.

The title of Kennedy’s new record is *Sonder*, a word that means the realisation that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. The lead single ‘Something to Someone’ is a rousing pop song about knowing that you’re loved, one built to fill stadiums and festival fields.

“There’s a phrase in Ireland that if you see someone that’s down on their luck or anybody in trouble, you say, ‘Oh, some mother’s son,’” he explains. “‘Something to Someone’ feels similar to me: no matter who it is, someone somewhere cares about them infinitely.” Who knows if it’ll end up being played live in five years: “I like the little songs that are in between the singles. That’s when I feel I get to really, fully express myself.” A track named ‘Innocence and Sadness’ feels like this album’s ‘An Evening I Will Not Forget’, he thinks, by which he means it’s special. They’re “the types of songs you have to fight for” despite the fact they’re the ones that make and keep you a legitimate artist.

I think that’s where Kennedy has met success with his strategy so far: if you create strong but delicate work that people feel enough ownership over, they’ll not demand more of you. If he’s already speaking for so many, who he is becomes less important than the universal truths he gestures toward.

His parents have been at the pub, sure, but that’s not oversharing, this is just the rhythm of his life. Plus, his dad would have come down for a pint regardless. “I’m happy to share vulnerable parts of myself, but I’m not happy to use certain parts of my life and memory to fast-forward my career,” Kennedy says, as he settles on his stance about privacy. “I’d like to think you get rewarded by the universe if you just hold on to certain things and just put all your heart into the art you make.” He thinks about this for a second and then makes a face like he’s stepped backwards to look at the view. “Maybe I’m wrong but I *hope* so. And if I’m wrong, I can live with it.” ®

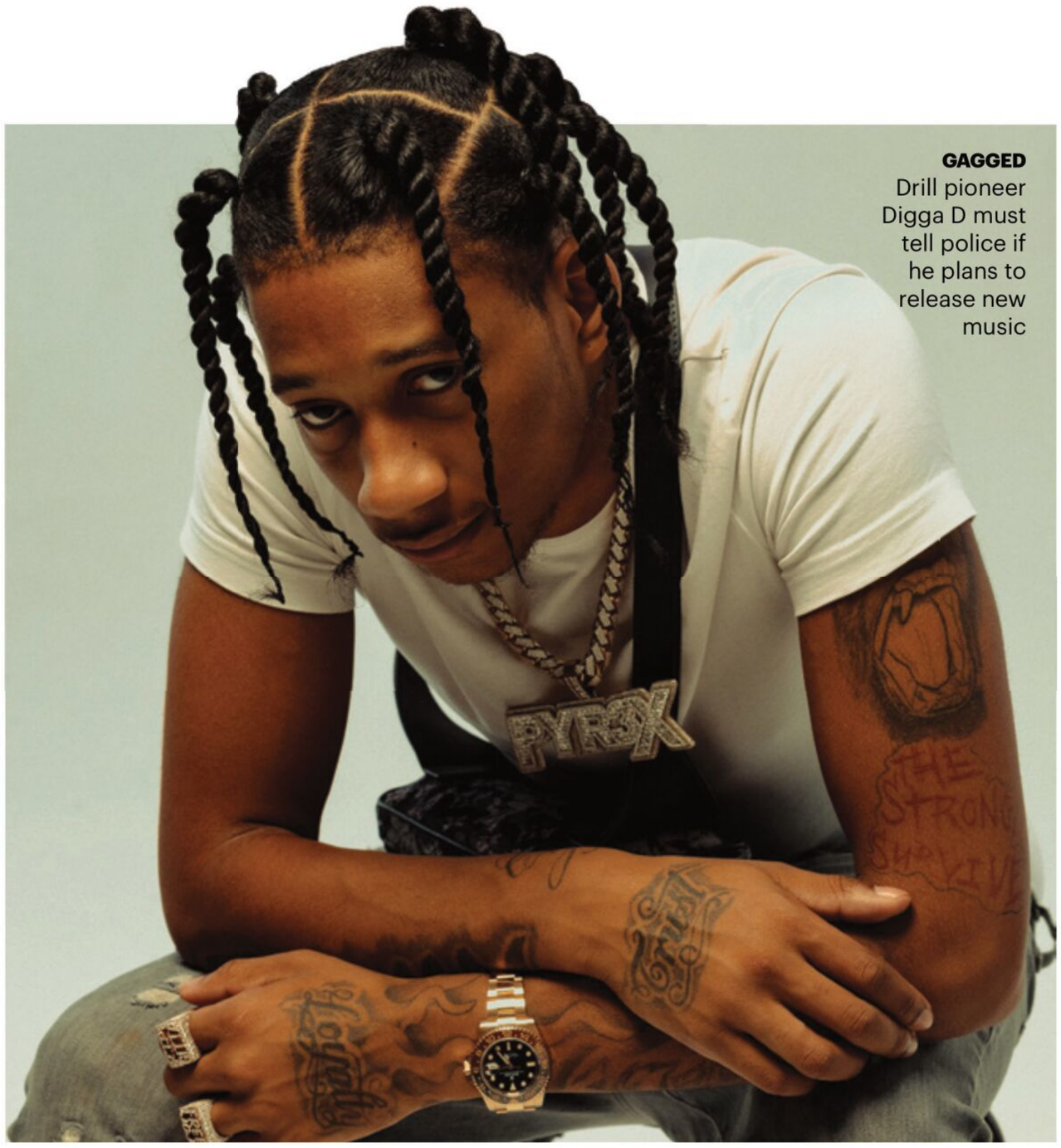
DERMOT KENNEDY’S SECOND ALBUM, *SONDER*, IS RELEASED IN SEPTEMBER 2022

For a large portion of white society, rap is associated with a "racist construction of Blackness: danger, threat, uncivil". As a result, drill lyrics are currently being misused in courts of law to prosecute Black and Brown young people in the UK, as a recent case demonstrates

Spitting Innocence

By Tara Joshi

On Bonfire Night 2020, 16-year-old aspiring rapper John Soyoye was murdered in the street by a group of young men.



GAGGED Drill pioneer Digga D must tell police if he plans to release new music

ON 1 JULY 2022, four of his friends, Harry Oni, Jeffrey Ojo, Gideon Kalumda and Brooklyn Jitobah were sentenced to 21 years' imprisonment (20 for Jitobah), after they were found guilty of conspiracy to murder for planning revenge attacks for Soyoye's death. Three of them were involved in an incident where the victims were set upon with a machete and then hit with a stolen car when they stood up. There were no fatalities.

Another six of Soyoye's friends were also sentenced for eight years after being found guilty of conspiracy to cause grievous bodily harm. On the day of sentencing, a protest march took place in Manchester against how the case has been handled by the court.

Despite not having any weapons, taking part in any violence or efforts to locate attack targets, four of the six other defendants were seemingly condemned solely for comments they made in a group chat with the other defendants three days after Soyoye's death.

The boys were defined – and therefore condemned – by the prosecution as being part of the M40 'gang', although they denied this. The defendants told the court that M40 is not a gang, but a drill music collective in which some, but not all, of them rapped. The quoting of drill lyrics in their chat, showing their shared love of UK drill – one of the most popular genres in the country – was also seen to be incriminating. (It should be remembered that even Ed Sheeran has released a UK drill song.)

Sentencing, Mr Justice Goose said: "It was played out in social media and through drill rap music, with threats of violence, the display of weapons, including firearms, machetes and crossbows."

TYPICALLY, SUCH CASES ARE tried under joint enterprise laws: conviction and sentencing by association if it's judged that the person had foreseen the associate might commit it. There is research that posits joint enterprise rulings disproportionately affect people of colour: most specifically, young Black and mixed-race men. (And according to a 2021 report from the Prison Reform Trust, more than a quarter – 27 per cent – of the prison population in England and Wales are from a minority ethnic group, in spite of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people making up just 14 per cent of the general UK population.)

Part of the reason for this is because joint enterprise encourages the deeply racist and classist assumption that groups of young, working-class Black men must be 'gangs', stripped of their individual experiences and humanity. In this particular case, the conspiracy charge rather than joint enterprise suggests that each of the individuals charged had a principal role – but a lot of the 'evidence' seems to show that some of this group of young Black boys have been sent to jail simply for who they knew and the music they liked.

As Roxy Legane from the platform Kids of Colour, who was present at the trial, explains to Rolling Stone UK, "Your choice to rap is a choice to be involved in a culture that is for many understood as 'criminal'. As groups of young Black boys demonstrate their musical talent in videos, the prosecution know full well that many won't be able to see past the 'gang' label, as what is presented to us as 'gangs' in mainstream media so often (unjustly) mirrors what we may see across musical platforms: the prosecution takes advantage of racism to do more racism."

And so, as the violent and nihilistic UK drill genre rises to the fore, with many marginalised young people using it as a means of self-expression, criminalisation by association with the music is on the

up. People could even just be quoting lyrics in a text message; using slang on Snapchat (in the Manchester case, one of the defendants having said "Gang shit!" was taken as 'proof' he was in a gang); have old phone photographs with friends doing 'gang signs' for clout; writing potential lines for new songs on their phone notes. No matter how tenuous it might seem to claim that teenagers liking UK drill confirms they are criminals, anything at all perceived as confirming violent behaviour can be removed from its context and taken as diaristic proof of reality by the courts.

OF COURSE, THE policing of Black music in Britain is nothing new. It spans back through jazz clubs, rock'n'roll, Notting Hill Carnival, jungle, UK garage, grime and the notorious Form 696 (a 'risk assessment' form through which the Metropolitan Police insisted that event promoters make note of the genres they would be playing and the ethnicity of their clientele, which was eventually scrapped in 2017).

But in the past few years we have seen an unprecedented level of censorship when it comes to UK drill. Earlier this year, *VICE* reported that YouTube had been working with the Met Police to remove drill videos from the site, complying with around 97 per cent of the force's removal requests.

Back in 2019, Skengdo and AM were given a suspended prison sentence for performing their song 'Attempted 1.0', the first time in British history that performing a song had led to a prison sentence. Meanwhile, Digga D is subject to a Criminal Behaviour Order that states he must notify the Met Police within 24 hours if he plans to publicly release new music, so that they can screen the songs. Breaching this will result in an instant recall to jail, and it's being enforced until 2025.

It's a similar story in the United States. Young Thug and Gunna were recently arrested and charged under the state of Georgia's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, with lyrics and social media posts from members of YSL (the label and collective who the authorities are framing as "a criminal street gang") being used as proof of conspiracy.

Legane explains, "I think rap lyrics can be misused first and foremost because rap is so specifically representative of Black culture, art forms and creative expression. For many, that association connects us to rap's brilliance and the incredible Black artists and groups across the globe, but for a large portion of white society, rap is associated with a racist construction of Blackness: danger, threat, uncivil. Quickly, simply by rapping, you become those things in a court."

Dr Alex de Lacey, a lecturer in music at Goldsmiths University, agrees. Speaking to Rolling Stone UK, he says: "One thing I always come back to is the way in which Black creative practice gets successfully policed – this idea that artists can't embody personas, they aren't afforded the realms to take on characters or role play. Everything they do is taken as verbatim, or indicative of some sort of criminality, which is just excessively racist."

For Eithne Quinn, professor of cultural studies at the University of Manchester, it's a complex genre to compare to any other. There are relatively few styles of music with lyrics that are in the first-person and so violent, but for the most part this is posturing. It's a nuanced distinction because, of course, there is real-life violence and trauma happening that some of these young people are witnessing, not least after well over a decade of Tory austerity and institutional neglect.

As Quinn says: "The music content is certainly often violent, as is lots of young people's popular culture. The lyrics are part of our violent entertainment culture. And they can sometimes also be a way of narrativising trauma for young people who have seen, or heard about, harm take place. If there's been a violent incident in your town or city, then that's shocking and newsworthy, and quite understandably young artists fold that in. But of course, it doesn't normally mean they have anything to do with that harm.

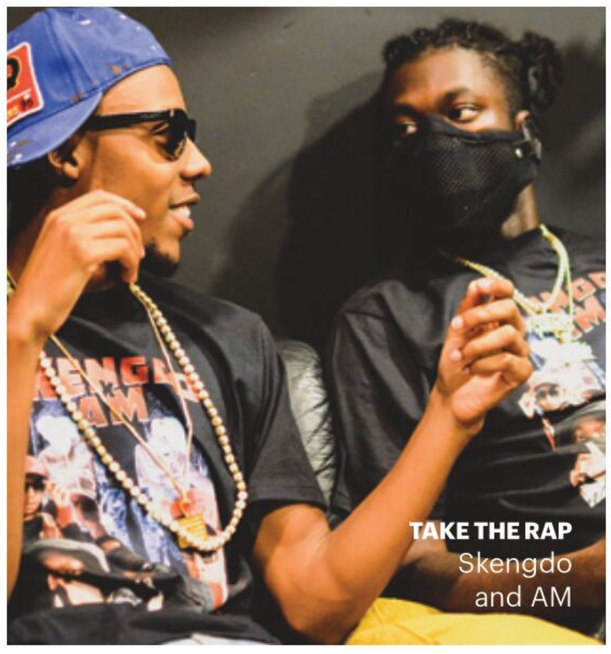
"Rap is a complex art form," Quinn continues. "These young people are rapping to entertain themselves and each other, as well as to develop their voice and artistry, and they're often customising and repeating the rap phrases of others who they admire. They're folding in exciting, everyday and sometimes traumatic experiences, as well as developing a sound that speaks to precarity, inequality and racism."

It's a difficult reality that also ties in with commercial success – as gangsta rap made clear back in the 90s, violent lyrics can help artists gain further fame and notoriety. Indeed, de Lacey also points to the work of academic Jabari Evans pertaining to Chicago drill: "He writes about digital clout, and the marketising of criminality – basically, rappers saying, 'If you're going to stereotype me, we're gonna embrace the stereotype and therefore make loads of money out of it and say: 'Fuck you' to the establishment.'"

In cases such as the Manchester conviction, there is little courtroom understanding of the music (at one point, a police officer mistook references to Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur in a text message as being about Manchester gang members).

For the past 14 years, Quinn has acted as an independent expert in UK legal

"Anything at all perceived as confirming violent behaviour can be removed from context and taken as diaristic proof of reality by the courts"



OPPOSITE: TUTENGES ROBIN; THIS PAGE: FINESSE FOREVA/CREATIVE COMMONS

cases in which the prosecution seeks to rely on defendants' rap music. She is very concerned about how the state is targeting groups of young Black people and using their art to convict them. She helped set up Prosecuting Rap UK to raise awareness about this and says there is a growing number of independent rap experts who can scrutinise the claims made by the prosecution about the music.

"What really shocked me was that in most cases in which rap was used, no independent expert was called; just a police officer offering interpretations to the courtroom of the lyrics, which, in my view, is a stitch-up," Quinn says. "It's really unregulated and unfair – procedurally, it's racist. The police experts are neither impartial nor are they often fully knowledgeable."

Quinn adds that in most cases rap lyrics and videos should have no place in the courtroom as they are too prejudicial and misleading – especially in group prosecutions that are increasingly the norm. She wants to see rap music kicked out of courtrooms; in the meantime, she says it is crucial that we question the legitimacy of using police as experts on rap and digital youth culture and support defence teams to mount strong challenges to the inclusion of this inflammatory material.

Legane noticed that it wasn't just the prosecution and the police framing drill in a specific light at the Manchester trial. "There was little done by defence to challenge the racist construction of drill in the courtroom, and often the approach focused on instead trying to distance clients from the genre," she says. "Frequently, even defence teams problematised drill, frequently sharing opinion to the jury that they agreed it was a horrific art form, why would anyone want to be involved in drill and its violence. Those thoughts were projected onto the jury in statements such as 'You might think drill is an utterly appalling form of music.' So when many – not all – defence teams fail to stand up for the genre and challenge the racism instead of the music, the prosecution has support."

She continues, "The prosecution frequently made lyrics seem as if they were really relevant, when they were in fact repeated or similar lyrics to many drill tracks. The violent themes and imagery shared in these specific songs and videos, were pitched as unique, when they are not. And some choosing to rap about events of harm they had heard about were used to infer guilt, and to suggest potential presence at events that the prosecution had failed to prove physical presence for. While the jury was told to ignore lyrics that were to do with hearsay, they were already spoken in the courtroom – what has been heard cannot be unheard."

RHYME CRIME Lyrics by Young Thug have been used to charge him with conspiracy

ALAMY

In New York, a bill has just passed in the State Senate that seeks to limit the use of rap lyrics as admissible evidence in courts. Here in the UK, the Crown Prosecution Service is currently reviewing the use of drill lyrics in criminal cases. But even if the rules change, it would likely still be too late for those ten young Black boys in Manchester, and many others like them. At the time of writing, there has been no institutional support, in spite of calls to Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, to step in.

"Policing UK drill helps the state to exclude those who it deems undesirable or undeserving of its protection"

The vilification of drill is a further symptom of this country's institutional racism and classism. As Dr Lambros Fatsis, senior lecturer in criminology at the University of Brighton, suggested in his *Policing the beats* paper, policing UK drill helps the state to exclude those who it deems undesirable or undeserving of its protection, with even supposedly 'progressive' powers turning their heads.

If we consider another case in Manchester, the reality becomes clear. In 2019, teenager Yousef Makki was fatally stabbed in the heart by his friend, the-then 17-year-old Joshua Molnar. It took place during a drug deal. Molnar's lawyer described him as living a juvenile fantasy life of a 'middle-class gangster'; there were photos and videos of Molnar posing with knives – and he was, of course, a big fan of UK drill. But Molnar was found not guilty of murder or manslaughter and was acquitted on the grounds of self-defence. He was given a 16-month detention and training order in a young offenders' institution for possession of a knife in a public place and perverting the course of justice by lying to police at the scene. Seven months later, he was free.

The difference between the cases, perhaps, is that Molnar is privately educated and white. ®

Great Love is priceless

To commemorate 50 years of London Pride, the Royal Mint has released a new 50p coin. Designed by a British artist and LGBTQ+ activist, Dominique Holmes, this is just one example of how the UK celebrates diversity. Join us and see things differently.

GREAT
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND

DANCING FOR YOURSELF

Jayda G, the London-based house music producer and DJ who recently featured on BBC Three's hit show *Glow Up* for Rolling Stone UK, brings joy and freedom to clubs across the world. She speaks about the power of music on memory, playing a more inclusive Coachella and the positive change happening for female and Black artists in the dance world

By ***Katie Thomas***
Photographs by ***Jordan Rossi***
Fashion by ***Sacha Dance***

JAYDA WEARS UNDERWEAR AND DRESS BY LES GIRLS LES BOYS, RINGS BY SWAROVSKI, SHOES BY SCHUH

Music can invoke a memory so vivid that, for a moment, you are whisked back in time. Though it doesn't appear on her 2021 *DJ-Kicks* mix album – a collage of her most meaningful records – a personal favourite for DJ Jayda G (aka Jayda Guy) is Cymande's 'Brothers on the Slide', originally released in 1974.

On a Zoom call from New York, Guy describes the setting that appears in her mind's eye when she hears that song: Grand Forks in British Columbia, Canada, where she grew up.

"It's super hot, 40 degrees Celsius, and it's dry heat, because it's like a desert," Guy says. "There's a lake and a river near our town and the sound of crickets. When you drive through, there's this dry, brown grass that rustles in the background. It's so hot that the wind is hot. It gives me this warm feeling of home within myself. And that song brings me back there."

The first time Guy heard 'Brothers on the Slide' was around 15 years ago, when her boyfriend at the time played it to her. It was rare to find a boy in Grand Forks that would play you anything soulful, she laughs, but ever since she's been reminded of him and the summer heat of Grand Forks every time the opening bars of that track ring out.

Fast-forward to 2020, and Guy, like so many others, decided to spend some time in her home town, and reconnected with her teenage boyfriend. "You'll love this one," she says with a warm grin before telling me that the pair have reunited, and he is moving across the world to join her in London, where she now lives.

Aside from the omission of this track, *DJ-Kicks* is a collection of records that conjure vivid memories, or remind her of important people, places and periods of her life. The track selection mirrors how Guy goes about her wider work as a producer and DJ, as she seeks to make and play music that's as moving for her heart and mind as it is for those expressing themselves on the dancefloor.

"I think I came out dancing," Guy smiles, thinking back to her very first experiences of music. Even while in the womb, she would start kicking when 'Alphabet St.' was playing. "And that is when my love of Prince started," she says.

She goes on to tell me fondly of the treasured home videos of her and her dad – who passed away when she was ten – dancing. Although they never actually danced together, because, for Guy, it's something she needs to do alone. "It's so funny because I totally reject him," she says of the videos. "Dancing is for me."

Guy's childhood home in Grand Forks was a loud, happy environment, soundtracked by soul, R&B, jazz and classical music. She'd learn dance routines to Janet Jackson, her sister would bring Prince records home and her older brother taught her about hip-hop.

Guy's father was also a musical influence. As a Black man in a majority white neighbourhood, he felt his culture was notably absent from their life in Grand Forks, but he was able to honour his heritage by blasting 60s and 70s soul tunes at home. "It was his way of connecting to [the parts of himself] that he wasn't surrounded by any more," Guy explains. Witnessing how he missed his roots informed the way she would navigate dance music as she grew older.

When she started going to festivals in her early 20s, Guy was blown away by LCD Soundsystem at Sasquatch!. The main stage of the festival looked out over the edge of a canyon, she says, remembering the spine-tingling feeling as the crashing keys finally dropped about three minutes into 'Dance Yrself Clean', the sounds reverberating off the surrounding rocky topography.

A DEFINING MOMENT came in 2013, when Guy moved to Vancouver to study a master's in resource and environmental management. This is where she was first able to tap into the hazy, melodic scene that was bubbling there, finding her crowd at last. "I was constantly searching for that community of music people and it took me a long time," she says. "I didn't really find it until I moved to Vancouver."

She remembers Floating Points' first-ever show in Vancouver as an all-time highlight, recalling how he had a neon sign above him saying "Clap!", which he would illuminate "when it was getting really wild and hectic in the room".

"I was constantly searching for that community of music people and it took me a long time"

At this time, Guy's career as Jayda G began to take off. Her first listings on online music magazine *Resident Advisor* date back to 2014, when she was DJing in London alongside DJ Fett Burger. The following year, she and Fett Burger would launch their label Freakout Cult, with Guy's debut EP, *Jaydaisms*, five tracks of warm, off-kilter house, dropping in 2016. Further EPs followed, before her debut album *Significant Changes* came out in 2019 via Ninja Tune.

Inspired by her studies, environmentalism and tracing the history of disco, *Significant Changes* was a sincere offering that captured many of the things that are important to Guy. Bolstered at the same time by her burgeoning fan base and her genuinely infectious energy in the booth – always joyfully, purposefully dancing for herself – Guy was quickly becoming a star of her scene.

But becoming successful in dance music, as in any discipline, comes with its challenges,

JAYDA WEARS DRESS BY AGR, RINGS BY SWAROVSKI, SHOES BY STELLA MCCARTNEY

JAYDA WEARS DRESS BY AGR, RINGS JAYDA'S OWN

“There’s a lot of people who I would have considered friends, who then in the industry part of our relationship have done something that’s hurt my feelings”

JAYDA WEARS TOP BY RHI DANCEY, TROUSERS BY DSQUARED2, JEWELLERY BY LAG WORLD, SHOES BY REEBOK AT SCHUH

and over the years Guy has had to figure out how to survive in a demanding industry. Dance music can be fickle and is so driven by socialising, substances and late nights that it's important to look out for yourself. She takes care to surround herself with people that truly make her happy.

"I've been burned," Guy reveals. "There's a lot of people who I would have considered friends, who then in the industry part of our relationship have done something that's hurt my feelings." She's learned, from professor and podcaster Brené Brown, that there are types of friendships that can play different roles in your life, and to understand when to make that distinction more clear.

GUY IS KEEN to play her part in bringing about change on issues that extend beyond music. As highlighted in her studies and the conservationist narrative of her LP, Guy wants to take care of the planet. With her team, she uses a carbon offset programme, The Gold Standard, which donates to various environmental causes after calculating the carbon emitted during your travels. Guy is pleased that festivals are getting better at executing their events in a more sustainable way, and says that a positive step is for artists to plan their tour dates sensibly, playing a series of shows in one trip and, where possible, not travelling across the world for a single gig.

"But the reality is, I am a DJ, I travel for a living, it's how I make my living. So it's hard." There's a fear people have, Guy thinks, of being criticised if they speak out about the environment, but the biggest thing she believes we can do to move forward is to talk about it, ask questions and be honest.

Another issue close to Guy's heart is improving diversity in dance music and championing those from minority backgrounds, but she feels that things are getting better. At her recent show at Coachella, she observed a considerable improvement, she says, with the lineup on the stage she was booked to play comprising majority non-male artists and several women of colour.

"Change happens incrementally," she says. "It doesn't happen overnight and I think it's silly for us to expect anything different. But we do have to be loud about it for the change to start, and I think that's what's happened."

Guy is using her platform to spotlight other artists of colour — as seen at her recent curated show at KOKO in London — and appreciates being given the space to do so. For her, the biggest shift since the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 has been the way that Black people are heard when they say something is wrong. "It sucks we still have to say it," she says. "But at least now there is a clicking of either recognition, understanding or action."

"You never know how your words and the music will be interpreted by others. And that's the beauty of art"

Guy has also recently released a single with Aluna, who, she says, "has really made the effort to lift up other Black artists and incorporate that into her industry". With its catchy pop melodies driving house rhythms and deep, rich synth lines, 'Mine O' Mine' is "about working really hard for something and knowing you deserve it", Guy explains. "And grabbing it because you know that this is your time. I feel like that's the case for a lot of Black people in this moment."

As for her own experiences as a woman of colour, Guy's relocation to London in 2019 was partially driven by the fact that she really saw herself represented there, both in terms of her heritage and the music she loves. She describes the move as "incredibly validating", and it's why *DJ-Kicks* begins with the light, soulful funk of Light of the World's 'London Town': an ode to her new home and her new community.

Although Guy has no doubts about what making music means to her, it's harder to know how her work touches others. Her 2020 anthem 'Both of Us' has particular resonance for me. The first time I heard it was the day before my mum died. In the darkest, hardest time of my life, everything about that track — the vocal, the tantalising breakdown, the euphoric release, the catchy piano riff and the springtime pastel-tinted video directed by Lou Jasmine — brought me comfort and joy.

What began, for Guy, as a song about unrequited love, metamorphosed into a way for people to feel their loss and to think about wanting to be with their person in a time so defined by being apart. "It grew into this thing that I could never have imagined," she says. "You never know how your words and the music will be interpreted by others. And that's the beauty of art."

Grief taught me that it's possible to experience a myriad of conflicting emotions at the same time. I feel that every time I listen to 'Both of Us'. No matter how heavy my heart is, there is so much light to be found in the joy of dancing – for yourself. ®

MAKEUP BY HECTOR ESPINAL; MAKEUP ASSISTANT RACHEL MAKONI; HAIR BY LOUIS SOUVESTRE; NAIL ART BY AMY THOMAS

THE BRITISH ARE COMING

The mythology surrounding "breaking America" still exists today in the hearts and minds of UK rock bands. Yet the reality of years spent in tour vans is unromantic and often leads to empty pockets. Is it crucial to UK acts striving for success and career longevity to win over the Americans?

BY **HANNAH EWENS**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **EMILIA PARÉ**

HITCHING A RIDE
Hot Milk's Han Mee and Jim Shaw

INSIDE AN AGGRESSIVELY air-conditioned art deco Hollywood building, a band from Manchester is playing onstage to a nearly empty room. A camera roves around them, as four other middle-aged cameramen record the performance from every angle.

"What you sayin'?" the frontwoman asks to hype up an imaginary crowd. Their music isn't too unlike Californian pop punk — power chords, youthful angst and elation — so they make sense in this city even if the accents are a novelty. This is a 1.30pm soundcheck for a major US talkshow slot, the sort normally frequented by pop stars or bands with a major upcoming release. No one here knows who they are, yet.

As Han Mee, Jim Shaw and the rest of Hot Milk begin to trail out of the building, an enormous security guy notices them. He makes some deadpan joke to Mee, a veritable Joan Jett lookalike: "You should dress more rock'n'roll, then I'd know you're with the band." She spins around, all limbs, makes a quip back at him, and he replies, excitedly, "I'm kidding, I love my rock stars to look like this!"

Pop rock band Hot Milk are going where many British acts have gone before: taking bold steps onto US soil to show the Americans who they are. Back at their hotel's pool, the band all have a cocktail and charge it to the room, hoping the label will pay the tab. They spread out across the loungers like happy starfish. The palm trees, cornflower sky and the sun's warmth on their leather jackets is the cliché LA rock-star moment they've been waiting for. The band have been on the road in an RV playing their first headline US shows in little clubs and venues. It's been unglamorous and exhausting, but it's exactly what they spent the coronavirus pandemic fantasising about. This is the American dream: for UK bands, playing to adoring US fans is almost always a common yet faraway goal.

There's something undeniably romantic about America to rock lovers. Whether you were a teenager during the sleazy 80s hair metal years, in the 90s as grunge went mainstream, or in the 00s when emo and mall rock had scene kids stuck to their computer screens playing around on Myspace, the epicentre of all of these distinctive musical eras was the US.

"I think I was always very attracted to America as a touring world; it was so far away from my bedroom in Preston that it felt almost like Disneyland. You do put it on a pedestal as a music fan and musician," says Mee.

Shaw agrees with his bandmate. "With the likes of MTV and the rock culture that we grew up with, it was heavily influenced by America: an abundance of Blink-182 and My Chemical Romance," he says. "America was so unobtainable — it was a different life."

JUST CHILLING
Mee and Shaw relax by the pool — and in it

WHEN THE BRITISH successfully invade the US, they capture the attention of the nation in a striking way. It all began in 1964 when The Beatles arrived in America to 5,000 fans, mostly young girls, crowded in the airport. The Fab Four achieved what no other British artist had: they topped the US charts. That decade, other English bands — The Rolling Stones, The Who, The Kinks and The Animals — defined the sound of the 60s both at home and overseas and pushed their US counterparts like The Beach Boys and The Doors to do better. This was dubbed the "British invasion", a wave of anglophilia that even led to some of these acts being more popular in the States than back in the UK.

Beyond that period, something changed. Although when acts broke America, they broke big — One Direction and Adele are two obvious examples — it was rare for British acts to get No. 1s or to penetrate the culture in any significant way. Often, artists just don't translate. Oasis, Manic Street Preachers and Stereophonics all made the trek and returned empty-handed and with bruised egos. The subsequent wave of 00s British indie didn't make sense to America, either (remember The Kooks, The Vaccines, Kaiser Chiefs?). Neither did Robbie Williams. The common denominator was that these exports were just *too* British.

Julie Weir has worked in the alternative and rock music industry since the 90s and is currently director of the Sony rock imprint, Music For Nations. She signed the UK rock giants Bring Me The Horizon and Bullet For My Valentine, as well as Hot Milk. "It's a decades-old concept," Weir says of breaking America. "The UK and the US are the two biggest territories for music, especially in the rock world. The UK looks to the US for what's going on there, and the US also looks to the UK. It's almost like a yin-and-yang, symbiotic relationship, but just because you're successful in one market doesn't mean you will be successful in both. Some UK bands the US just do not get, and vice versa, but because of the size of the audience in the US, their bands do often translate to the UK easier."

That doesn't mean our bands will stop trying. "Breaking America" means something different to each band and their team anyway. Hot Milk's PR, Hayley Connelly, says, "It might be just playing sold-out club shows and getting some good press looks, or it might be aiming for larger venues, big festivals, inflated streaming numbers and international press covers and TV. It is all subjective on what that success is, of course, depending on the artist." She notes that in the past, bands of this type would have played US travelling rock festival Warped Tour to help them find their fanbase. Now that's gone, it's somewhat more difficult, with playlist placement, US festival slots and support tours in its place.

One of the only bands to break America in the past two decades are Rolling Stone UK cover stars, The 1975. Jamie Oborne, their manager and founder of label Dirty Hit, says that if you manage to break the mammoth country, you have enormous potential to earn money.

IN ACTION
Hot Milk on stage

"IF WE DIDN'T LOVE IT, WE'D GO THE WAY OF SO MANY BANDS" — *MEE*

The 1975 frontman Matty Healy always wanted to be a star in America. "At the beginning, we actually spent more time in America than we did anywhere else," Oborne says. As soon as the band started releasing music, they went out there to tour and have been largely based in the US since by virtue of how much they play and record there, only returning to the UK in some permanent way once the pandemic started.

By way of comparison, it doesn't take a lot to break on this side of the pond — there are only a few TV channels and major radio stations. In the US, local radio reigns and many states are as big or bigger than the UK. That said, the nature of the music industry there rewards participation.

"You have to put loads of work in," says Oborne of taking bands around radio stations, "but if you go into the station, do interviews, radio sessions, then they play the record. You have to get in first, but I like how transactional it is. If you do the

STATESIDE
America loved One Direction

ALAMY

FAB FORMULA
The Beatles in America in 1964

work, the records get played. Of course, they have to react, but I quite like the quid pro quo."

There's an element of ego that must be discarded to take on the challenge of America. You can be a famous artist in the UK but completely unknown in the US and should expect to be treated like a brand-new US artist when doing the rounds there. Many artists won't even attempt it, in part because of that, but also because of the gruelling nature of the tradition.

"I'm so willing to do it," says Mee of the hard graft required. "If we didn't love it, we'd go the way of so many bands. It's a brutal schedule and a lot of these people don't love it enough to carry on doing this." The effort that goes into doing so can't be understated, though — it's a serious endeavour.

Recently, the pandemic and Brexit — as well as the economic climate under the Conservative government in the UK — have made breaking the US far more difficult. There is currently an issue with freedom of movement in the US, too, with a backlog of US visas waiting for approval.

Referring to the offer of a TV appearance for Hot Milk, Weir says, "We were just so lucky that it fell in the middle of a tour run as we were trying to sort the visas for such a long time before. In the old days, you could sort a visa out and do something pretty sharpish. Now, we started sorting the visas six or seven months before and got them by the skin of our teeth. I've never seen such a delay."

She believes that given all this, it's no longer assumed that an artist will attempt to grow a US audience. "There's always an ambition but never an assumption because the financial costs involved with doing it are so high now, too," she says.

An artist's label will look at streaming stats to see if there's enough of a pre-existing listenership to warrant it and then you need a UK and US management team — as Hot Milk do — to have a shot. "To break the US market, it's great to have a team on the ground there because as much as we can understand the market, we're not in the market," Weir continues. "To properly drill down and break what is going on there, you have to be there every day, you have to be watching everything. There's radio, press, the influencer market, which is terrifying over there..."

A band like Hot Milk has the appropriate attitude. As the keeper of their social media accounts, Mee noticed a growing grassroots fanbase in the States. She was the one who initiated this tour: "I said to our label, 'I think there's something going off in the US. I think now's the time.'"

As they sit in the sun, Mee takes a video for their Instagram stories. She ruffles her hair and pulls her sunglasses down. "We're about to do the biggest thing of our careers so far," she excitedly tells their followers, withholding the information about the TV appearance. There's no doubt the pair are living their dream, experiencing each moment of their new mission with wonder.

It's as Oborne said of The 1975 breaking America: "I find that you strive for these things and then they happen. And it's almost like the pursuit of these things is more rewarding than actually getting them." It's the engagement with the grand mythology that you'll always remember. And it's simultaneously making a myth of your own with grit and drive that your new fans will be drawn to.

"IT'S BEEN THREE OF US IN A DOUBLE BED EVERY NIGHT" — SHAW

Mee and Shaw sit in the poolside restaurant for a rare proper lunch. They calm each other's nerves ahead of the rest of the day — the proper TV performance and a show at the Moroccan Lounge near Skid Row — and reminisce about this tour. "It's been three of us in a double bed, you know, every night. And it's not been easy," Shaw says.

Mee shakes her head and grins as she takes his statement a step further: "It's been shitting in a Pringles can."

The tribulations began on the journey over when a series of mishaps meant they were last to board. "We finally got on the plane and I turned to you and started crying," Mee remembers, gesturing at Shaw. "That's why we're out here in America post-pandemic and we're enjoying each and every moment of these shows. You've only got one shot and now it's time to make it for yourselves." ®

ALAMY

AMERICAN DREAM
Mee and Shaw are determined to make it in the US

RINA WEARS DENIM JACKET BY MIU MIU

RINA SAWAYAMA

HOLDING HERSELF TIGHT

On her second album *Hold the Girl*, the British-Japanese pop star attempts to make peace with a traumatic past. Here, she talks about the cathartic process of learning to 're-parent' herself, turning 30, and her relationship with her mother

BY **HANNAH EWENS**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MARCUS COOPER**
CREATIVE DIRECTION AND STYLING BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

FOR TWO years, British-Japanese pop star Rina Sawayama was too scared to leave her house in south-west London. The genesis of this fear was out of her control – for months at a time UK citizens had to legally shield themselves from the world and each other – but even between lockdown periods she remained alone in her self-imposed prison, promoting her debut album *SAWAYAMA* and writing music.

"I was trapping myself and I'm sure a lot of people felt this anxiety: you just became this weird workaholic but depressed person," she remembers, a picture of dewy health as she sits before a Hollywood vanity mirror in a photography studio in New York City.

She's out in the world now. Tonight, she's playing one of a run of large shows in the east coast city to thousands of predominantly queer pop fans. It feels novel to her to be laughing with the makeup artist and relishing the luxury of getting glammed up when only a few months ago having someone that close to her face would have thrown her into a panic. Sawayama was that friend who cancelled last minute or avoided talk of plans and was terrified of giving people – particularly freelancers she might work with for shoots or content – the virus and preventing them from being able to work.

Spending that much time by herself meant that introspection was inevitable. "Like a lot of people, lockdown made me look at myself and the things that were not making me happy in my life," Sawayama confides. She started a "more intense and specialised therapy" over video call than she had previously been doing (counselling and psychotherapy) to work through some trauma she experienced as a teenager: "It was emotionally and personally one of the hardest things I've ever done," she says.

As the sessions began to throw up complicated feelings, she began to consider whether her second album could be used to process these. "The new kind of therapy really opened up new points of exploration and I really wanted to see whether I could make those things into a pop song," she says. When writing with her long-term collaborator Lauren Aquilina, they would talk through her therapy and together musically translate different problems and discoveries. Beforehand, Sawayama would often be brought to tears by the emotional weight of what she was learning about herself.

By late July 2020, the call to action became impossible to ignore: "I remember when Taylor Swift released *Folklore*, I was like, 'This bitch is writing about fake stories and she just wrote a whole album. If she can do it, I need to do it.'"

Hold the Girl is an eclectic 13 tracks ordered to chart a journey of emotional growth from pain through revelations to existing in a healthier place. Her trauma is contained in the album – and she's sure that some fans will be able to deduce what it is – but she doesn't want to speak about it yet.

"For me, it's important that the listener is able to listen to it as a pop record first without that background, [and] make their own feelings about it," she says. "And then, when I'm ready, I think I will be able to talk about what it's actually about."

"IT'S THAT NEWFOUND CONFIDENCE THAT YOU HAVE IN YOURSELF WHEN YOU HIT 30. YOU JUST CARE LESS ABOUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK ABOUT YOU"

What she is happy to talk about is that the album focuses on the idea of "re-parenting yourself", something Sawayama believes she did with some success through therapy. The self-help definition of re-parenting is to give yourself what you didn't receive as a child – in her case, from her Japanese mother who raised her as a single parent in London, where she didn't speak the language. If there is a tiny "inner child" within us all, it's screaming out for love and attention, demanding that its needs be met.

There has been a recent wave of female millennial pop artists reaching their thirties and writing about the maturing and increased emotional intelligence that happens around that age.

Likewise, Sawayama turned 30 during the pandemic, celebrating with an intimate, six-person gathering, following the UK's short-lived 'rule of six'. It's an age she's enjoying: "It's that newfound confidence that you have in yourself when you hit 30. You just care less about what other people think about you."

She wouldn't have felt able to be her own parent when she was younger. "When you're in your early to mid twenties, you're not really an adult so how can you parent yourself?" she asks rhetorically.

"When I hit my thirties, I was like, 'Oh, I'm an adult. I really feel like an adult now.' To be able to see the things that happened in the past from an adult perspective is something that's very new when you're in your thirties. Also, now I'm at my parents' age when they had me, that's a new perspective that I can now see, like, 'God, I cannot imagine being a parent at this age.'"

On a practical level, re-parenting meant this: taking an hour or two a day to do art, which she hadn't done since taking her GCSE in the subject. She now looks for opportunities to mess around, to make something for the joy of it. Her daily reminder to herself is to let go of expectations. While growing up, she felt the cultural influence of her native country, where standards for children's performance and behaviour can be high. Sawayama's ethos now is to be as hardworking as possible while also giving herself rest, quiet and compassion.

The pressure of being a female pop artist on the rise is inescapable. On the one side, Sawayama has successful friends and contemporaries like Charli XCX releasing the albums of their careers, while on the other, stans discuss who the Main Pop Girls are, ready to call out any perceived 'flop' moments.

"Thinking about putting your mental health first is scary as a freelancer, because I'm a freelancer as well," she says of being selective about work opportunities and work load. "I personally don't like to think that there's competition in the music industry with girls in my field now. It's easy to start to buy into that narrative so much that if you don't do this, someone else will. But I try not to engage in that any more."

She grew up watching the Christina versus Britney rivalry, where the two very different female stars were pitted against each other. "It's silly," she says, "we should all support

RINA WEARS DENIM JACKET AND JEANS, BOTH BY BALENCIAGA

each other as there is space for everybody, especially because of streaming."

What stands out about Sawayama's career to date is that she has achieved her success very much alone. "I'm 31 now, I signed my first album deal when I was 29, so I'm coming quite late to this game, especially as a pop artist," she explains.

"A lot of pop artists start young, their parents support them and their parents walk them through this insane journey and career and industry. I don't have that; like, my mum was in Japan the whole time [*SAWAYAMA*] was doing its thing and she doesn't have any knowledge of the industry. So not having that meant that I had to be like, 'No, actually, I'm looking at my calendar and that to me looks like an 18-hour day, so I'm not doing that.' I'm putting my foot down and being like, 'It doesn't make me more productive if I haven't slept.'"

She has known for years that she needs to prioritise self-care and to refuse excessive work but it's only recently that she's felt able to say no. It's about being able to split yourself in two and have mental conversations with yourself as if you're a softer, second person, I offer. Exactly, she says, "Once I got to that part of re-parenting myself and treating myself as a 'we' and being like 'Do you need to do this?' And if it's a no then it's a no."

The title track of the album is the statement piece on re-parenting yourself. It opens like a holy gesture to Madonna's 'Like a Prayer' and becomes an emotional dancefloor filler about caring tenderly for the younger person you abandoned. "*Sometimes I get down with guilt / For the promises I've broken to my younger self*," she sings with 00s R&B vocals. "*Moving on, maybe I never will / 'cos I left you spinning on the carousel*."

SAWAYAMA'S MISSION WAS TO make uncool music cool. On her mini-album *RINA* and debut full-length *SAWAYAMA*, the singer pulled references from Britney Spears, Evanescence and the sludgy rock of bands like Korn and Papa Roach. In the two years since the latter's release, the pandemic nostalgia train has meant that those troublesome sounds – nu-metal, 90s and 00s pop and stadium rock – are now in fact in vogue. This meant that the influences for *Hold the Girl* had to be more surprising again.

Stand-out track 'Catch Me in the Air' was heavily inspired by Irish family pop band The Corrs. If that wasn't rogue enough, she wanted a Corrs song as if pitched to Gwen Stefani, who had just launched a comeback at the time of writing. "I had 'catch me in the air' written down as a note already," says Sawayama. "From the pre-chorus to the chorus I wanted to have that feeling of a lift, as though you're jumping off a cliff into crystal-clear water."

The song specifically is a celebration of her relationship with her mother. "It's about how we've kind of caught each other in the air at different times in our lives, and how intense single parenthood can be. Just celebrating that partnership because when you [have] a single mum, they're your sister and your child at the same time. Just writing about the complications of that from an adult perspective."

She didn't have the maturity or generosity to understand that prior to age 30, when she was frustrated by her mother and the life they shared. "I could never have done what she did: she couldn't speak English, moved [to the UK] with my dad, and then they separated," she says. "My dad was the breadwinner. My mum didn't know how to earn money. We shared a room till I was 15. How the fuck did she do that when she was a little bit older than me?"

THIS SPREAD: VINYL TROUSER LOOK: RINA WEARS TOP BY OTTOLINGER AT END., RED LATEX UNDERWEAR BY HOUSE OF HARLOT, BLACK THONG BY COCO DE MER, TROUSERS BY CHEMA DIAZ. DENIM TROUSER LOOK: RINA WEARS JEANS BY BALENCIAGA AT END., LATEX UNDERWEAR BY HOUSE OF HARLOT

"IT'S QUITE RANDOM FOR A JAPANESE-BRITISH ARTIST TO MAKE COUNTRY MUSIC, BUT I NEVER REALLY CARE ABOUT THOSE KINDS OF THINGS. I JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN"

To complete the production, she sent pictures of what she wanted it to sound like to producer Stuart Price. "It was someone meditating on the edge of the cliff, it was seagulls, it was someone on a pier, it was Irish coastline, waves hitting," she remembers. "And he absolutely nailed it – it does sound like that."

Another sonic curveball is 'Frankenstein', a tense and tetchy indie track (imagine Girls Aloud covering Franz Ferdinand or Maximo Park) featuring the singer begging someone to therapise her, to "*put me together, make me better*". She wrote it with Aquilina and Paul Epworth, known for working with Adele and Florence + the Machine, but who started off producing indie disco music with artists like Bloc Party. Sawayama asked Epworth to approach Matt Tong, formerly of Bloc Party, to play the frenetic drums on the track. "He took a picture of his hand covered in blood. I think the BPM is 130-something, super fast," laughs Sawayama. "He was just so sweet. We were little pen pals for a bit because he's Asian as well, so we were talking about being Asian in the music industry and how inspiring he is to me."

British indie and all its accoutrements ("tight, tight, white skinny jeans, Converse and a waistcoat") is a cultural era Sawayama has a fondness for given that she grew up near its epicentre of Camden. "I'd go to gigs twice a week, buy so many records of bands that started with 'The' – landfill indie," she smiles. She followed one of these bands, The Bravery, around on their UK and European tour.

"Now I know how it feels to be a fan of someone [who] didn't fucking give a shit about us... It was drinking and lad culture 2.0; people *didn't* give a shit and that was part of the aesthetic. I remember queuing up at Brixton Academy at 9am. [I] just try to give a lot more love to my fans than The Bravery ever did. No shade but it's true."

Sawayama's intelligence underpins everything she does: it's why she's so fondly supported by critics. When we speak, she looks between the mirror and me and then signs off her thoughts with a smile and nod and a bashful "yeah" as if she's simultaneously considering her answer and checking its reception.

Her mind gave her entry to study politics, psychology and sociology at the University of Cambridge, but the experience of a prejudiced white upper-class world was one she didn't enjoy. Afterwards, she was a jobbing model and then spent her twenties playing to London's underground music scene with pop dance routines with a camp edge and

singing songs about feeling isolated and existing on social media.

With a ride-or-die fanbase, critical admiration and incisive conceptual vision behind all her work to date, Sawayama has yet to have a true solo hit. 'This Hell' is the song that is best positioned to chart: a queer party anthem about being condemned to an eternal damnation that's equal parts Shania Twain, Gaga and ABBA.

"I've just been so fascinated with the feeling of escapism that country music has. It's very homey, but for a Brit, it sounds like the big Wild West," says Sawayama. "It's quite random for a Japanese-British artist to make country music, but I never really care about those kinds of things. I just want to have fun."

Its ambiguous chorus – "*this hell is better with you*" – makes the track double up as a post-apocalyptic, tongue-in-cheek reflection on surviving with loved ones through the pandemic, climate anxiety, the country's political landscape and the cost of living crisis – or any combination of the above that we are now subjected to.

There is nothing to suggest that Sawayama won't transition from a niche LGBTQ+ meets avant-garde pop space onto a wider public stage of celebrity.

During the pandemic, she had the eyes of the music world on her when she campaigned for British arts awards to allow non-UK passport holders to be eligible for nomination. As a result, the Mercurys changed their eligibility criteria. She's determined to be nominated for the prestigious award – previously won by PJ Harvey, Dizzee Rascal and Dave – this year.

"It's an award that I've always looked up to," she says. "That sticker I would always see on my favourite CDs as a teenager. It's important to give the same platform and credit to people who might not be eligible just because of their citizenship. It's important to have a level playing field in music."

Sawayama has also made a foray into film. In early 2023, her lead supporting role in *John Wick: Chapter 4* will be revealed. The film team arranged for her to have a call with the director Chad Stahelski to do a screen test. "A couple of days later, I was on a plane to start training for the fight scenes which is three months of intensive work," she tells me.

"They wanted someone who could do choreography and Chad Stahelski had watched my music videos, specifically 'XS' and 'Bad Friend': one has dance, and the other has fighting." She plans to continue her acting career, which will further boost her profile, having enjoyed the vigorous training and the family atmosphere of being part of an ensemble cast meeting daily.

Being a rising star during the pandemic has been odd, mostly because she isn't sure whether the past two years have made standom in general more passionate or if her fans just grew in number and intensity.

"Before the pandemic, no one recognised me ever. I could just go out in the streets looking like shit and now it's very, very different," she says carefully, adding that she's usually approached in central London, but it's even happened on the road where she lives, which triggered privacy concerns. "I actually had to go back into talk therapy when I first started getting recognised because of the anxiety of not seeing anyone, almost getting agoraphobia by not leaving the house. People have nice intentions and want to come so close to you and hug you, but it was completely freaking me out."

"I HAD TO GO BACK INTO TALK THERAPY WHEN I FIRST STARTED GETTING RECOGNISED"

This was another issue that she was able to solve through therapy. Naturally, having done it in some capacity for most of her life, she'd recommend it to anyone and everyone. "When I was working three jobs and my mental health was probably at its worst, I was prioritising saving for therapy every single week," she says. "That was a priority for me." As if anticipating the inescapable issue of financial cost given the underfunding of the NHS, she adds, "But I was able to get my current therapist for a much lower rate because of means testing, a sliding scale. Go to therapy, it's awesome."

NOW THAT SHE'S RE-PARENTED HERSELF, has it made her feel strongly about whether she wants children of her own or not? "I guess that's another thing that really inspired the whole [parenting] topic," she laughs, bringing the conversation back to the pandemic. "So many people around me got pregnant and married and I was just like, 'Aaaaahh, I'm not ready at all.' The verdict's still out about children: I don't know. I've never been the type to desperately want children. I don't know if I'm ready for kids." For now, she's a mother to her dog and considers that responsibility enough in an era where she's enjoying being out of lockdown and partying with friends.

"The one thing that I'm really grateful for is that my mum never pushes me to have kids or get married," she adds. "She's not very traditional Asian in that way. She's like, 'You do your career.' Because I think for her, at that time, it was the decision between your career and your child. And she is so career-driven that I can sense that she probably wanted to have more of a career."

Raising Sawayama was her mother's main job until Sawayama was 12 and her mother went to design school. The pair funded her mother's education by taking a lodger. "I remember trying to help her do her coursework and she couldn't ever help me with my homework because she couldn't understand what I was doing," she says. "She's thriving now, she's doing really well."

Her relationship with her mother now is much improved, the best it's ever been. Was success with the specialised therapy the reason for that? "No," she says. "It was sadly, I think, me having a bit of success in music. She's finally like, 'I don't need to worry about you any more.'"

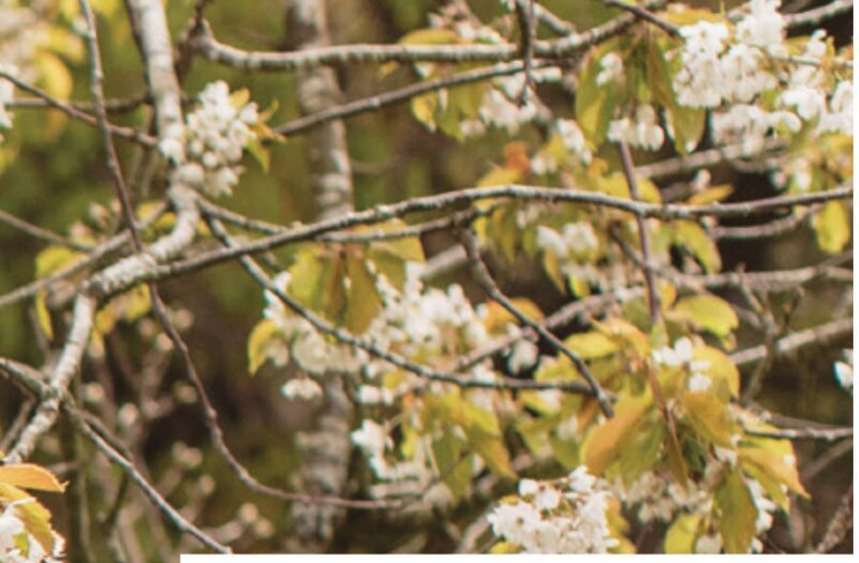
The turning point was her show at the Roundhouse in November last year, a short walk from where Sawayama was raised. Her mother attended from Japan. "Everything that she had done in the first 28 to 29 years of my life had been for me," she says of her mother. "And once she realised that I didn't need support as much any more, she just eased off. Now, knowing how much she had to go through, I can understand and sympathise with her."

Sawayama sees this as a symbiotic, dynamic shift that allows them both to step towards the other with warmth. Over the past two years, they've decorated Sawayama's home together, her mother instructing on choices remotely over video call. "There's kind of a dual appreciation of each other's hard work," she says.

At the Roundhouse that night – the inverse of her recent agoraphobia experiences – she performed 'Catch Me in the Air' to more than 3,000 people. After many years as her single parent's child, Rina Sawayama was holding herself in the air with her mother there only to watch. ®

LOCATION: WAVERLY STUDIO, BROOKLYN; HAIR BY GREGG LENNON JR USING HIDDEN CROWN AND ORIBE; MAKEUP BY DAVID RAZZANO AT OPUS BEAUTY USING NARS; NAILS BY ERI ISHIZU AT OPUS BEAUTY USING APRÉS GEL-X; LIGHTING & DIGI TECH: ISAAC ROSENTHAL; FASHION ASSISTANT: NORA RUSSELL; FASHION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE; RINA'S CREATIVE TEAM: JORDAN KELSEY AND CHESTER LOCKHART

RINA WEARS DENIM JACKET BY MIU MIU, TROUSERS BY 16ARLINGTON



THE BALLAD OF THE KANGAROO BANDIT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CHRISTOPHER BETHELL

Writer Joe Zadeh penned an essay on being mixed-race and growing up in northern England for *Haramacy*, a new collection that explores visibility, invisibility and race

HARAMACY

FROM THE SUMMER OF 1999, southern California was plagued by one of the most prolific bank robbers in American history. The man worked alone and moved strategically from city to city, bank to bank. By March of 2001, the FBI suspected he'd hit 24 banks in 19 months. Sometimes he robbed two or three in a week. The media dubbed him the 'Kangaroo Bandit' because he wore a backpack on his chest – but I think they should have called him the 'Octopus'. He was declared the most wanted man in California, but nobody could catch the Kangaroo Bandit.

"It's tempting to liken him to smoke," reported the *Los Angeles Times*, at the height of his spree. "He coils in and out of view, his presence an omen of danger. Then he evaporates into a sunlit afternoon, while those left behind wonder what it is they have just seen."

The FBI knew the Kangaroo Bandit was around 25-30 years old, around six feet tall and around 200 lbs. He usually wore long-sleeved shirts, dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. Sometimes he ran off; other times, he got into a red Toyota pickup or a black sports car. But the human behind those details, the gross physical facts of skin, hair and bone, remained a mystery. You see, the Kangaroo Bandit had a special power: nobody could decide how he looked.

Witnesses described him as everything from a dark-skinned white male to a light-skinned African American. Some said Puerto Rican. Others said Brazilian. A few swore he was Middle Eastern. And some of the bank tellers were convinced he was wearing dark mascara. "You know they all can't be right," said FBI Agent Joseph White. Photos and security camera footage didn't help. Sometimes his skin looked fair, sometimes it looked dark. Sometimes he had a moustache, sometimes a beard, and sometimes he was completely clean-shaven. The Kangaroo Bandit was large, he contained multitudes.

The FBI asked the public for help, offering a $15,000 reward for anyone who could help find the robber. Hundreds of people called in, turning in innocent men of every skin colour imaginable. Race is one of the fundamental ways society categorises people, and yet something was short-circuiting. He wasn't just moving between races, he was playing with them. The British-Jamaican sociologist Stuart Hall said that the body is a text, which we all inspect like literary critics – and yet nobody could read this man.

I am no bank robber, but I have been likened to smoke. I was born in Gateshead and I am a mixed-race male — a Brown father (Iranian) and a white mother (English). Most people visually identify me as white: an Englishman with a Geordie accent and a decent tan. The same way they would have identified Steve Jobs as white, despite the fact his birth father was a Syrian Muslim from Homs called Abdulfattah Al-Jandali. And yet, just like the Kangaroo Bandit, my skin seems to change all the time.

The first time I was racially abused I was called a "paki". The second time I was called a "dirty Israeli". A Scottish girl once called me a "fucking geranium", but that was just funny. I've had white people tell me I'm Brown, white people tell me I'm white, Brown people tell me I'm white, and Brown people tell me I'm Brown. Iranians just tell me I'm not Iranian enough.

When I first went on a video call with the editors of this book, I irrationally convinced myself that they might see my face for the first time on camera and think, 'Oh, you're a lot whiter than we imagined. Sorry, we can't include you!'

People aren't what we wish them to be, nor what they seem to be. They are what they are. I am English. I am Iranian. I am geranium. I coil in and out of view. And while I may not evaporate into sunlit afternoons, my presence, especially in airports, is seen as an omen of danger.

Airports are the gladiatorial arena of race and ethnicity. Since the age of 25, I've been taken to one side for an extra bag check or additional questions at almost every one I've visited, even on the small Channel Island of Guernsey, with its one runway. Yes, it's me, I have come to bomb the place where you make the Gold Top milk.

In 2019, I flew to New York. My bag was checked twice at security. Then, at the gates, I was taken to one side and put in a cordoned-off area with six other men; I was the only one who seemed visibly white. Two of them looked at me, perplexed. "Iranian," I said, and they smiled and went back to their phones.

Our bags were opened and checked. I boarded the plane, sat down and put on my seatbelt. Then my name was called over the tannoy, with a few others. My bags were removed from the overhead compartments and checked one more time, in front of the entire plane carriage. It was brutal and embarrassing. Yet I can't deny that somewhere deep inside me there was a strange sense of pride. At that moment I was more Iranian than ever.

COLOUR BLIND Joe Zadeh has been called white, Brown, and "not Iranian enough"

MIXED-RACE PEOPLE ARE often used to symbolise racial harmony, especially in advertising where brands are keen to appear forward-thinking and inclusive. But my mixed-race experience has more often been one of inner conflict and confusion. In a world riven by racial fault lines, it's bewildering to exist in a rupture. To get by, you need to embrace contradiction, accept the mangle, and live in a state of cognitive dissonance, whereby the mind is always filled with conflicting thoughts and feelings. Split at the root. Racially ambiguous. Racially amphibious.

"My mixed-race experience has more often been one of inner conflict and confusion"

"*I stand at the edge where Earth touches ocean*," wrote the American-Mexican writer and self-described "Chicana, tejana, working-class, dyke-feminist poet" Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "*where the two overlap/a gentle coming together/at other times and places a violent clash*."

My English grandad was a lorry driver from a small village in Northumberland who fought for Churchill in World War Two, voted for Margaret Thatcher and always donated to "the Legion". My Iranian grandad was a sugar maker from Tehran, and a card-carrying member of the communist party (known as the 'Tudeh' party). He despised Britain for the way it had invaded Iran in 1941, decimated his country and helped topple its democratic leaders during the 1953 Iranian coup d'état. My father often tells me, through humble laughter, that it's good he never lived to meet his British grandchildren, because he would have been ashamed to know they existed. At school, my father was taught how the evil British businessman William Knox D'Arcy stole Iran's oil, while my mother was taught how Britannia ruled the waves.

My English grandad was a good, kind man with big, bony hands and twinkling eyes, and the limited racial awareness quite typical of a small village in 1970s rural England. When my mother took my father to the village, Grandad took him to the local pub. The bar and lounge fell silent and nobody made eye contact. The village, at the time, had a population of around 1,500. Some, I'm told, had never seen a Brown man until my father walked in. Grandad told my mother, "He's nice, but I don't want you marrying a dark-skinned fella."

My mother and father got married in 1983 anyway. Grandad and my father became good friends. They travelled to lorry shows together; shows where you look at lorries. They carried on going to the village pub, where Grandad would proudly announce him as "my son-in-law".

When my mixed-race forearms go their brownest, they don't remind me of my father, they remind me of Grandad. There was a certain milky paleness beneath my father's Iranian skin, but Grandad's English skin always turned a deep and musty olive after long afternoons tending the tomatoes in his greenhouse with his cream shirt sleeves rolled past the elbow. After a hot summer, his skin went slightly darker, even, than my Iranian father's. And yet this metaphysical concept floated in the air between them, still through friendship. A subtle difference invisible to the naked eye. Grandad's whiteness, my father's darkness.

A RESEARCHER IN THE PACIFIC coral reef once recorded seeing an octopus change colour 177 times in a single hour. Yellow, red, brown, black, as well as glittering greens, blues, golds and pinks. Their colour can change with their mood, but more often than not an octopus is trying to convince either predators or prey that it is really something else.

I did this on a cold doorstep in Telford, Shropshire, last winter. I was canvassing for the Labour Party ahead of the 2019 UK general election, speaking to a woman in her late forties outside her home. We were discussing everything from education to austerity; then she unleashed a long rant on immigration.

"How can we be paying all those taxes, and working so hard," she said, "and then we're put in a queue for the NHS behind all these unemployed immigrants?"

She didn't know I was the son of an immigrant. I imagine she assumed I would have been browner or blacker. She couldn't see the glittering greens, blues, golds and pinks. I felt desperate to tell her, but another part of me just wanted to listen. Unaware of where I came from, she voiced her prejudices freely — not defiant, almost confessional. In that moment, I

was granted a view beyond the ugly weeds of her racism to see the roots below.

Once we moved past the fictional hordes of immigrants clogging up the hospitals and raking in benefits, it was clear she was wracked with genuine fears around health and financial insecurity. Her husband, who was self-employed, had become ill and been forced to take six months off work, in pain and not earning. Hearing his name, he joined us at the door on crutches. Life was quite visibly shit. But in the desperate search for blame, they'd taken a wrong turn. They didn't blame the government, who had just drastically downgraded their local hospital and closed the A&E. They missed the facts and found a scapegoat.

"Who's that lady we like, the one who tells it like it is?" she said.

I took a few hopeful guesses.

"Katie Hopkins," said her husband.

I realise that to some, to just stand and listen would have been inconceivable. My father would have found it inconceivable. But part of the white privilege I carry is that racism is not a part of my everyday life. It's rare and quick, not everywhere and always. In a way, I felt white enough to entertain her. With my identity cloaked, I got a little look at the conditions in which her racism grew.

The Filipino-American clinical psychologist Maria P.P. Root has argued that mixed-race individuals can expand the discussion and potentially take us beyond race. After all, we have both feet in both groups. And in a world of maddening polarisation – in which people seem stuck in alternate realities, where each side has their own facts, histories, and narratives – I can see the powerful role of someone who has

"Your blood is probably as mixed as mine; I was just mixed recently"

experienced both white privilege and racism. We're like walking sociological experiments, wooden horses rolling through the gates of Troy.

And yet, I couldn't bring myself to say anything much at all to this woman and her husband. The moment was there and I just watched with wide eyes. 'What do I say? How do I say it? And why me? Who do I think I am? Some sort of mixed race messiah?' I made a few half-hearted points and shrugged at things I didn't agree with, then fake-smiled a goodbye and walked away. In the shower, for weeks afterwards, I replayed the scenario in my head in a thousand different ways.

THE VILLAGE CHURCH wouldn't allow my father, a Brown non-Christian, to be married there, so my parents did the ceremony at Newcastle Civic Centre and then, in a charming act of defiance, drove to the village church afterwards and took their photos outside. A passer-by who went to school with my mother walked over to congratulate her. When she pointed out my father as her husband, he sighed and said, "Could you not have found a nice English bloke?"

I used to think their interracial wedding photos seemed so radical and groundbreaking for 80s northern England. But then I did some reading and found out there were married interracial couples living in Newcastle as far back as the second century (like Regina of St Albans and Barates of Palmyra, now modern Syria, who lived together in North Shields, a small town on the north bank of the River Tyne). The Cambridge classicist Mary Beard cited them, and many other examples, in a debate sparked in 2017 when the alt-right conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson wrote that a BBC programme depicting a mixed-race family in Ancient Britain was "the Left" trying to "rewrite history".

When you know about Regina and Barates – and the racial mixing that has always under-pinned British history, from Chinese communities in 19th-century Liverpool to the Arab, West African and Caribbean communities of Cardiff's Tiger Bay that predate the Windrush Generation of 1948 — it's hard to swallow the various books, news stories and academic papers that come out every year beckoning the approaching future of "mixed-race Britain" — like this is a novel moment for civilisation. The growing population of "mixed-race" Britain would be better described as a growing population of people whose race has mixed in living memory. Even using the term 'mixed-race' sometimes feels, to me, like accepting the notion that racial purity does exist, somewhere out there.

How do we measure racial purity? Where are the boundaries of my whiteness and brownness?

If I have a child with a fellow mixed-race person, are they mixed-race? If I have a child with a white person, will they be half mixed-race? Or will they just be white? Where is the cut-off point? Where does the ocean touch the Earth? And who decides this? When will my mixedness be flushed out of the system? Can you be a third-generation immigrant? Fourth? How much of your racial identity is what you are and how much of it is what people see in you?

When we talk about our genealogy, why do we only go back so far? Genetic testing has repeatedly shown that Europe is a melting pot of bloodlines from Africa, the Middle East and the Russian steppe. The geneticist Adam Rutherford estimated that over 500 years, each of us has around 1,048,576 ancestors. Inside us all bubble ancient cocktails that have been shaken since the very beginning. Your blood is probably as mixed as mine; I was just mixed recently.

Sometimes, I like to watch YouTube 'reaction videos' of people doing 23andMe tests and discovering that they are 15 per cent African, or 10 per cent Native American, or 5 per cent Jewish, or all three. And yet there is something in their voices that makes me think they just can't comprehend it. "Either we are all multiracial, or, really, none of us are," said the Filipino-American philosopher Ronald Sundstrom. Or, as Andy Warhol — the late Slovak-American artist and son of two working-class Lemko emigrants, a distinct minority ethnic group from the Lemkivshchyna region of Eastern Europe — quite decadently put it, "If everybody's not a beauty, then nobody is."

The FBI never caught the Kangaroo Bandit. After he'd robbed over one hundred banks, he simply handed himself in, having come to the conclusion that his crimes were not as "victimless" as he first thought. And when he was finally identified and imprisoned, the trick of his baffling invisibility was revealed. The Kangaroo Bandit was neither Black, white, Puerto Rican, Brazilian nor Middle Eastern. You already know why. A Black father and a white mother had created a man who looked like almost everything in between. ®

***HARAMACY*, EDITED BY DHRUVA BALRAM AND TARA JOSHI, IS OUT NOW FROM UNBOUND BOOKS**

King Princess' Wild Life

The most outrageously quotable rock star of her time is determined to be herself

BY **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GIONCARLO VALENTINE**

KING PRINCESS has a new song she can't wait to talk about. It's a break-up song that starts out soft and dreamy before erupting into a scorched-earth mid-90s rager, with the biggest chorus she's ever belted. But the description that really nails 'Change the Locks' — the one that makes King Princess beam as she shares it — came from someone in the studio, who said it sounds like menstruating at Lilith Fair.

"I was like, 'Cunt! That's *exactly* what I'm going for!'" she says. "It's a journey."

This is what it's like to converse with Mikaela Straus, 23, the indie-pop visionary behind King Princess. With her feathery, shoulder-length chocolate-brown hair and extensive knife collection, she exudes a rock-star persona as purely savage as anyone in her generation — she could be Marc Bolan reincarnated or a long-lost cousin of John Lydon, dropping brazen one-liners in between hits from her vape pen. She uses the word 'cunt' in almost every sentence, so much that her publicist is worried her quotes will be unusable for this story. A story, by the way, that Straus feels she was born for.

"I remember when it hit me, that as a queer person, I could be in this magazine," she says. "I remember Megan Fox's cover, and she was talking about masturbating to girls. It was incredible to hear this woman talk about fucking and coming. I was like, 'There you have it, folks! I could be in this.'"

It's early April in Brooklyn, and Straus is on the cusp of completing her new album, *Hold on Baby*. We're at Mission Sound, her father Oliver's studio in Williamsburg, the neighbourhood where she grew up. Even though she partly lives in LA these days, she has a true New Yorker's preference for her hometown. "I come back and I'm the person I'm supposed to be," she says. "Nothing better than being stony-baloney on the train."

"I was like, 'What is my purpose?'" she recalls thinking before this LP. "'I'm not heartbroken; I'm not pissed at some girl. How do I write music if it's not about getting back at someone?'"

She describes the studio's vibe as "shabby chic", gesturing to the tattered, multicoloured kitschy couches around her. There's one wall separating the studio and home, and classic-rock memorabilia is everywhere. A platinum plaque for '1950', Straus's breakthrough 2018 hit about queer love, is framed on the wall.

Straus was just exiting her angsty teens when she debuted with that song, an R&B slow-burner that caught the attention of Harry Styles, who tweeted the chorus lyrics and immediately got 100,000 retweets.

Some rising artists might have flinched under that pressure. Straus grinned and strapped her new fans in for the emotional roller coaster that was *Cheap Queen,* her debut album that arrived a year later. The record shows Straus howling her woes across soulful grooves as if her insides are on fire, with song titles as bluntly literal as it feels to get your world shattered when you're 19, like 'Do You Wanna See Me Crying?' and 'You Destroyed My Heart'.

Now Straus is in her longest adult relationship yet, with creative producer Quinn Wilson, and she's a pretty happy person overall. ("Ish," she corrects.) Like many songwriters before her, she found that this made it difficult to write. "I was like, 'What is my purpose?'" she says. "'I'm not heartbroken; I'm not pissed at some girl. How do I write music if it's not about getting back at someone?'"

In February 2021, shortly after she attended the funeral for her 89-year-old grandfather, Straus's team booked her some sessions with Aaron Dessner — the scruffy multi-instrumentalist who added his indie-folk

sensibility to Taylor Swift's *folklore* and *evermore* – at his home studio in upstate New York. "I was like, 'I don't know if I can handle meeting anybody,'" she says.

Straus ended up staying at Dessner's cosy barn studio for a total of five days. She'd walk in the snow to his house, and his wife would make her coffee before they got to work.

Hold on Baby came together through those sessions and others with Ethan Gruska (known for his production work with Phoebe Bridgers), producer Dave Hamelin, and mixing engineer Shawn Everett. "All I've ever really wanted was to feel camaraderie in making music, and I started to feel that," Straus says. But she emphasises that first and foremost, it's a King Princess record – she plays many of the instruments, and co-produced every track. "I'm at the helm of this ship," she says. "Or else it wouldn't be my music."

Take the silky horn section that floods out more than halfway through 'Crowbar'. "I played those by hand on a Mellotron," she says. "A full horn section, track by track. Shawn was like, 'Bitch, I have spent so much time and money hiring horn players, and this whole time I could've just had you with a Mellotron?' It's the cheap queen within me."

One of the album's highlights is 'Winter Is Hopeful', a sultry stunner written for Wilson, whom she began dating four years ago, after messaging Wilson on Instagram claiming she loved her work. "I made a little lie," she says. "I did love her work, but I didn't know it was her. So she thought it was business, and was really upset when she found out it wasn't."

Straus has fantasised in detail about their engagement. "There's a flock of owls by me," she says. "I'm on a horse, riding through a field, and Quinn's on another horse. The horses are riding to each other. We stick our fingers out as we pass and put the rings on each other." She pauses, then looks up. "That's going to take a lot of planning."

Off the final 4-train stop in the Bronx, within 400 acres of woods, sits a tomb in the shape of an Egyptian funeral barge. In it lies Isidor Straus, the co-owner of

Macy's, who went down with the *Titanic* in 1912, along with his wife, Ida. (They are the elderly couple on the bed, with water rising around them, in James Cameron's *Titanic*.)

The Straus grave is a mecca for *Titanic* die-hards, but their great-great-grand-daughter doesn't really give a shit. "You know where I will not be caught dead? There," she says, deadpan, and very much still in Brooklyn. "I'd sooner die on a cruise ship than go to that cemetery."

Straus's connection to history's most famous maritime disaster caused immediate online backlash in 2019 — even when she clarified that she is far from a spoiled heiress. "My family is so estranged on that side. I didn't receive any coins," she says. "They're salty people."

Yet she understands why industry-plant accusations are so prevalent in music. "People are frustrated by the socioeconomic state of the industry," she says. "I totally get where it comes from. I'm just not that girl. I'm not going to front like I was some rich kid. There were tough moments, and there still are."

Straus's parents, Oliver and Agnes, divorced three years after she was born in 1998; she stayed at her father's studio on Wednesdays and weekends. "All I wanted to do was be in that fucking studio," she says. "There's photos of me butt-naked with a microphone, standing on that table. For kids, I think it's the shit. It expands your brain."

Other realms were more challenging. She rode horses and played sports, in part because those activities helped her wrestle with questions of identity. "When you're a little non-binary kid and you put on a uniform that's neutral and you get to put your mind into one activity and not think about all the other shit, it's really healthy," she says.

Straus says she knew she wasn't a girl before she knew she was gay. "It took me a long time to figure out the language," she says. "It's always been a part of my music. Playing with it, discussing it, making jokes about it."

Her parents found out she was queer when she was 13, after they read her texts. "It was so glaringly obvious," she says. "But honestly, it was no thang. Some parents have that moment where there's just that one blip of like, 'But grandchildren!' And then you're like, 'You can have [children] and be fully gay.' And they're like, 'Oh! Never mind.'"

Straus moved to LA to attend the USC Thornton School of Music, but lasted only a year. '1950' came out less than a year later, and on the same day her guitarist quit out of frustration that the band wasn't going anywhere, Straus got a meeting with Mark Ronson, who promptly signed her to his Columbia Records imprint, Zelig. "He allowed me to be me," she says. "And he saw the value in that, instead of trying to be like, 'Well, if you did this and this...'"

FAST FACTS

FUZZY FEELINGS
Straus takes comfort in her menagerie of pets, who include a two-year-old border collie named Raz, a cat, and several goldfish named after pop stars like Jazmine Sullivan, Adele and Stefani Germanotta.

BOLTS, CUT
Fiona Apple is one of her best friends in the industry. "She's been an incredible North Star for me," Straus says. They got matching tattoos in 2020, and one of Straus's new songs is named after a lyric from Apple's 'I Know'.

FREE AS A BIRD
On the cover of *Hold on Baby*, Straus poses with a barn owl. "She's shrouding me with her wings, and I'm looking cunt and glam, obviously. Prince had his doves. I think the owl is mine."

"When you're a little non-binary kid and you put on a uniform that's neutral and you get to put your mind into one activity and not think about all the other shit, it's really healthy"

She says now that she slipped into a hyper-feminised persona on her first album, almost as a way to mask behind her sudden fame. "I was this kid dealing with '1950' popping off and my life changing, and I was fucking terrified and insecure," she says. "*Cheap Queen* was my armour, and now I don't need it. I got rid of the armour."

Straus and I walk to lunch in Williamsburg, passing by her old haunts. She's already admitted she trusts no one from Los Angeles and can't drive, but this is where her inner New Yorker truly comes out. She points to McCarren Park, where she played football as a kid. Then she spies the apartment where an old hookup used to live.

"She had a boyfriend, and he was a DJ," she says casually. "I told him straight up, 'I will fuck your girlfriend if you disrespect me.' And then I did. He started crying."

An ad for Jell-O shots in the window of a bar sparks another memory from a couple of months ago. "I was in Dallas at my favourite gay club, called the Round-Up, and that was my dinner," she says proudly. "I had about seven to 12 [shots]. Delicious."

Earlier this year, she opened for Kacey Musgraves alongside the queer trio Muna. "Kacey made a conscious decision to bring out people that were reflective of what the audience looked like," Straus says. "I thought that was a really fucking cool move."

Then she gets frustrated, thinking about the low percentage of out queer artists in music. "It's still not the norm," she says. It bothers her that LGBTQ artists are reductively grouped into playlists, even if their music sounds nothing alike. "White Male Pop, as a playlist," she quips. "Could you imagine?

"We're still the minority," she concludes. "We've got to unify. That's my biggest thing. We've got each other."

Straus has been getting noticed on the street more these days, especially in her hometown. "It's been a lot of really sweet, positive messages from the gays," she says. "This old man stopped me on the street today and was like, 'I love your work.' I was like, 'Oh! Reaching different demographics!'"

In a moment like this, it's hard not to feel like she's taking her rightful place in a long lineage of glamorously dishevelled downtown rebels – people like Lou Reed, Patti Smith and David Bowie.

Maybe the best comparison, with her unfadable bravado and hair perfectly out of place, is a Julian Casablancas for a new generation of LGBTQ kids.

"That's my goal," she says, smiling. "Just in a trench coat." ®

FASHION DIRECTION AND STYLING BY ALEX BADIA; HAIR BY RUTGER AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY KABUKI; MARKET EDITOR: LIZZY ROSENBERG; FASHION ASSISTANT: KYLE RICE; THIS AND PREVIOUS PAGE: SHIRT AND SHORTS BY MIU MIU. ALL JEWELLERY BY TIFFANY & CO.

YOU CAN'T KEEP A HOT GIRL DOWN

MEGAN THEE STALLION is reigning over rap while reeling from loss, betrayal and violence. Here, the superstar opens up like never before about all of it

BY MANKAPRR CONTEH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RAMONA ROSALES**

FOR JUST AN HOUR

Megan Thee Stallion's world shrinks to the size of a Los Angeles escape room. Here, on this April evening, there are no festivals to rehearse for, no verses to perfect, no brand deals to broker, no rumours to right or trauma to relive or pretrial hearings to sit through — just Megan, a small crew, and a steely determination to conquer the game.

"We did one before, and we were pretty bad at it," she says of her last escape-room experience. After we enter our room, Megan and I, along with three members of her team, each have a foot chained to the floor. It seems we've been captured by wayward seamen cursed for all eternity for their sins, and we have 60 minutes to escape their ghost ship. First, we need to get the shackles off our feet. There's a grid of rusty iron separating us from the other half of the room, where what looks like a birdcage hangs from the ceiling. I spot a key inside.

We prod at it with our hands and wooden poles we've been given. "Do we want to ask for help?" I suggest.

"No!" Megan cries, matter-of-factly. Sam, of her Roc Nation management team, eventually knocks the key towards us with one of the poles.

"Are you competitive?" I ask Sam. "*Stupid* competitive," he replies.

"I'm *fucking crazy* competitive," Megan one-ups, then shows just what she means. As we make our way from room to room, Megan takes the lead, climbing on stools, peering through peepholes, guiding us through mazes, and turning over props. Her head swivels from corner to corner, surveying every crevice for the next way out.

Eventually, we make it out with only a handful of hints from our game master. "The first time we did it, it took way longer," Megan says. "I'm starting to understand the rooms more, though. Next time we'll be thinking three steps ahead."

Sure, breaking out of the ghost ship was hard, but it's designed to be conquered. Megan has to look at her life the same way, or else the weight of the loss, violence and vitriol she's faced will pulverise her.

In just a few years, Megan Jovon Ruth Pete has gone from rapping at Houston kickbacks and strip clubs to becoming one of the biggest new superstars in music, assembling a legion of fans she's dubbed Thee Hotties. Along the way, in March 2019, she lost her mother — a Houston rapper known as Holly-Wood, who raised Megan on UGK and Biggie, and later became her manager — to brain cancer, then lost her great-grandmother just two weeks later. (Megan's father, Joseph Pete Jr., was incarcerated for the first eight years of her life; after he got home, he and Megan were attached at the hip until he died when she was 15.)

Those losses left Megan, now 27, without the people she trusted most as she navigated skyrocketing fame, graduated from Texas Southern University (with a bachelor's degree in health administration), and, most shockingly, endured a July 2020 shooting allegedly at the hands of Tory Lanez, a recording artist and former friend. She survived, but has been locked in a contentious battle in court — and the court of public opinion — ever since.

Even without any extra emotional distress, life as hip-hop's resident It girl and one of the best rappers alive can be *intense*. During the three months I got to know her, Megan premiered her first Super Bowl commercial, rehearsed for and shot her first major movie role, released a single featuring Dua Lipa while joining her on tour, became the first woman to rap on the Oscar stage, presented the Grammy for Best New Artist (which she had won the year prior), completely shut shit down at Coachella, graced the Met Gala's red carpet, performed at the *Billboard* Music Awards (where she took home the prize for Top Female Rap Artist, and also endured some odd, clingy behaviour from supermodel Cara Delevingne, who fangirled over Megan all evening), and, oh, yeah, wrote and recorded much of her highly anticipated second studio album, which she hopes to have out this summer. "I want to take you through so many different emotions," she says of the album, an effort to process her pain without losing sight of her strength. "At first you was twerking, now you might be crying."

Her friends, her team, and escape rooms help, but night after night, she still dreams about the shooting. "'Right now we're going through some dark things. You are built for this,'" she says, coaching herself. "'God must got something good planned for you, because I don't think he'll put you through this if he wasn't going to give you your reward at the end.'"

AFTER WINDING THROUGH the streets of some of LA's most gilded neighbourhoods, past Beverly Grove and through the Hills, we arrive at the Bel-Air mansion Megan has made her base for the month of Coachella. The sprawling home feels busy, if a bit icy, with its towering, crisp white walls, and various bags and boxes in corners. A few of the people who keep the gears of the Megan machine turning mill about quietly. Two of her five dogs, grey Frenchies named 4oe and Oneita, bark hello from their kennels. (She also owns a lizard.) Her pets, innocent and affectionate, put Megan at ease. "I don't think they would do anything to hurt me," she says. "That's something I know for a fact."

Megan and I take our seats in an elegant dining room for a dinner of six vegetarian courses prepared by her chef. As he drops off some crudité, Megan laughs to herself. "They are really embarrassing me," she says of her team.

"How so?"

"Because they are being so formal."

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA; PRODUCTION BY SJ ASHBY AND RYAN HOLT FOR ANDERSON HOPKINSKINDLY PRODUCTIONS; HAIR BY KELLON DERYCK; MAKEUP BY LAUREN ELISE CHILD; NAILS BY MICHELLE NGUYEN; STYLING BY ERIC ARCHIBALD AND HANNA ISAKSSON; TAILORING BY ALEX NAVARRO

PREVIOUS SPREAD

BODYSUIT BY **HOUSE OF JMC**, CHOKER BY **LAUREL DEWITT**, EARRINGS BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**

THIS PAGE

DRESS BY **AFFFAIR HAUTE COUTURE**, JEWELLERY BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**

I ask her if things are normally more low-key around her.

"We are all playful. They're being so serious tonight."

After her chef leaves us with a sweet-squash dish that Megan loves, she notes how kind he is. Megan has a habit of keeping the people she takes to close: her Roc Nation team; her longtime manager, T. Farris; Emilio Coochie, who has been photographing and filming her since 2018; her hairstylist and best friend, Kellon; the women who do her makeup and nails; her best friends from college; and her close friend from high school, Callie. "I don't know if it's a Southern thing," she explains, "but I love feeling like this is my family. This is my thing. This is safe."

In July 2020, a year after her mother and great-grandmother died, and six weeks after topping the *Billboard* Hot 100 with her 'Savage' remix, Megan was looking for family, filling a void with new friendships and fun nights out. Rapper and singer Tory Lanez was one of those new friends, and the evening of 11 July began as one of those nights.

Forty-five minutes into dinner, she confronts the toll of that evening head-on. It started with Megan streaming herself, her friend Kylie Jenner, and Lanez lounging in Jenner's pool on Instagram Live. After the poolside hang, Megan headed home in a car with Lanez, his driver, and her former best friend from Houston, Kelsey Harris. Megan explained what she says happened next in an April interview with CBS's Gayle King.

Megan said an argument broke out between Harris and Lanez in the car, prompting her to ask the driver to pull over and let her out. Megan got out, but says the others persuaded her to get back in, since they were close to their destination. After getting back into the car, she said, the arguing escalated. According to an LAPD detective who interviewed Megan, she and Harris argued, too; LA prosecutors say Megan and Lanez also argued.

When Megan got out of the car for good, she said, Lanez shouted "Dance, bitch!" and began shooting at her. Her feet bleeding, Megan dropped to the ground and crawled to a stranger's driveway. Speaking to Gayle King, Megan said Lanez apologised profusely, and begged for Megan's silence by offering her and Harris "a million dollars". Police vehicles and helicopters swarmed the scene; saying she feared law enforcement would respond with deadly force if they found out a Black man was holding a gun, Megan told police she stepped on glass. (Lanez has denied shooting Megan; his representative did not respond on the record to a request for further comment.)

Lanez was arrested for carrying a concealed firearm. Meanwhile, Megan was taken to the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, still maintaining she had stepped on glass. As officers left the hospital, a doctor reportedly told Megan there were bullet fragments in both of her feet. (CBS and Page Six later obtained the hospital's medical report that corroborates Megan's account of her hospital admittance and bullet wounds.)

Megan says that, at first, she tried to protect Lanez by keeping the shooting private. Then came the spread of jokes, memes, and what she says is false information – like rumours that Megan and Lanez had a sexual relationship and that she became jealous as Lanez and Jenner interacted that night. Soon, though, it became too much for her.

On 20 August 2020, just weeks after releasing her smash Cardi B collaboration 'W.A.P.', Megan named Lanez as her alleged assailant in an Instagram Live stream: "You shot me and you got your publicist and your people going to these blogs lying." In October 2020, Lanez was charged with one felony count of assault with a semi-automatic firearm and another for carrying a loaded, unregistered firearm in a vehicle. The case is set to go to trial in September; Lanez has pleaded not guilty.

MEGAN WILL FACE TORY LANEZ IN COURT WHEN THE CASE AGAINST HIM GOES TO TRIAL IN SEPTEMBER. "I WANT HIM TO GO TO JAIL," SHE SAYS. "I WANT HIM *UNDER* THE JAIL"

Back in the LA mansion, the dinner table between us feels a mile wide as Megan begins to cry, still struggling to process everything that happened. I ask if I can sit beside her, and she agrees, eyes damp and hurt radiating outward. "I thought we had a real connection," she says of Lanez. She believed she and the rapper had bonded over the mutual loss of their mothers; Lanez's mum died of anemia complications when he was 11. "I thought he knew me. And I never would've thought he would've shot at me at all."

"I never put my hands on this man," she continues. "I never did anything to him. There was an argument. People argue every day. Friends argue every day."

Megan's scars run deep. First, there was the gruelling physical recovery. "What nobody knows is, I had to get the surgery the same night. I stayed in the hospital in California for maybe four days," she says. "Then I was in New York for a while. Both of my legs wrapped up. I could not walk. I still have bullet fragments in my feet right now. I was very scared that I was not able to be Megan Thee Stallion no more. And I was fucked up." She began physical therapy in New York before travelling to Tampa, Florida, where she regained the ability to walk.

There are the nightmares. Then, there's the embarrassment, the way she blames herself for what happened and how she handled it. "I feel shame, a little bit, because even after he shot me, I still was thinking about everybody else in the car," she says. "I thought everybody in the car was my friend, [and] the whole time, that's not how they thought of me. That's what really hurts."

The incident, Megan implies, was a betrayal on two fronts. Megan claims that Harris met with Lanez at a hotel less than two days after the shooting. "I'm like, 'Kelsey, as my best friend, why would you meet up with the person you saw shoot your best friend?'" Megan tells me. "She said, 'Megan, y'all wasn't answering my calls. My back was against the wall. I didn't know what to do.' What the fuck do you mean your back is against the wall? You're the only person in this situation that would clear this up for me.

"This girl told me out her mouth, 'He told me, "Oh, thank you for not saying nothing. Now let me invest in your business. Let me do this. Let me do that."' And all I know was, from that day on, she never said nothing else about the whole situation online." (Harris did not respond to a request for comment; Lanez's representative did not respond on the record to a request for comment on this allegation.)

Before pleading not guilty to the charges against him, Lanez released an album on the back of the incident. On it, he claims he's being framed, while alluding to a soured romance with Megan. ("That man was never my ex. You were never my man," Megan insists.) Lanez continued to allude on Twitter to a sexual relationship with both Megan and Harris. After Megan posted screenshots of an apology Lanez texted to her hours after the shooting, Lanez wrote, "Good Dick had me fucking 2 best friends... and I got caught... that's what I apologised 4... it's sick how u Spun it tho..."

That same day, Lanez bolstered false claims

CHOKER BY **LAUREL DEWITT**, EARRINGS AND RINGS BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**

BODYSUIT BY **HOUSE OF JMC**, EARRINGS BY **VINTAGE ESCADA**, RINGS AND CUFFS BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**

by media personality DJ Akademiks, who has been lambasted for sensationalising violent conflicts in rap and for his recurring, hateful, misogynistic tirades against Megan. In February, Akademiks tweeted that court proceedings revealed that Lanez's DNA wasn't found on the gun recovered at the scene of the shooting (in court, Lanez's attorney claimed that a DNA swab of the gun was "inconclusive" and that "there were four contributors") and that he had seen unreleased evidence that seemingly absolved Lanez of the crime (release of which, if by Lanez, would have been a violation of a court order). Lanez's attorney argued that Lanez did not provide Akademiks with any such evidence, but because he egged on Akademiks' claims on Twitter while addressing Megan, Lanez was briefly taken into custody for violating court orders prohibiting him from contacting or harassing Megan, or discussing any discovery in the case with outside parties.

"I think it's so crazy that people are able to get online or publish anything that is not a 100 per cent fact. That really is messing with my life. How are you able to do it and get away with it?" she says, before hinting at her plans to tackle rumours about the incident. "I just learned that you really can't get away with that, and I'm going to get you. Right now, I'm just getting all my stuff together because I'm seeing it. Yeah, you keep doing that. I'm going to spin the block on you."

Beyond crass YouTubers eager to discredit Megan with inane theories and dubious claims, there's a whopping brood of sexist, crude, online randoms who insist she has lied about being attacked by Lanez, that this is a ploy for some sort of perverted clout, that she should be retaliated against.

When Megan's assault is the topic du jour on my Twitter timeline, I mostly see messages supporting her and rebuking her detractors. Megan gets glimpses of this, too. "When I see Thee Hotties care about my mental health, they'll be like, 'OK, girl, you don't want to get online. That's fine. Oh, Megan, I'm just sending you love and support today,'" she recalls. "I'm like, 'Y'all know my spirit!'"

But more often she encounters disparagement. "I get online," Megan says. "I see funny shit all day. But then in the mix of that, there is also 20 people at-ing me at one time, saying crazy stuff. I'm like, 'My 15 minutes [online] is over. Get off.'" When she's not seeing her version of that night's events blatantly discounted, she's seen Lanez being celebrated, sometimes gruesomely. "I see people saying, 'Damn, I would've shot that bitch too,'" says Megan.

"In some kind of way I became the villain," Megan says, bewildered. "And I don't know if people don't take it seriously because I seem strong. I wonder if it's because of the way I look. Is it because I'm not light enough? Is it that I'm not white enough? Am I not the shape? The height? Because I'm not petite? Do I not seem like I'm worth being treated like a woman?" For just a moment, her voice cracks.

"I'm trying every day to get through it and be good. I feel so bad because I don't feel like anybody's taking me seriously, but I don't want them to see me cry. I don't want them to know that I feel like this, because I don't want them to feel like, 'Oh, I got you. I'm breaking you.'"

She seems to especially feel this way about her alleged attacker. "'I feel like you've already tried to break me enough. You've already shot me. So, why are you dragging it out like this? Like, what else? Have you hated me this much the whole time and I didn't see it?'"

As it stands, Megan will face Lanez in court when the case against him goes to trial in September. "I want him to go to jail," Megan says plainly. "I want him to go *under* the jail."

"IN SOME KIND OF WAY, I BECAME THE VILLAIN," MEGAN SAYS OF THE SHOOTING'S AFTERMATH. "IS IT THAT I'M NOT WHITE ENOUGH? AM I NOT THE SHAPE? THE HEIGHT?"

MEGAN WRITES everywhere – in the car, in bed, in the shower. "I put my phone outside the shower but close enough to where I could still tap it. Shit be getting wet all the time, fucking up my phones," she explains. "It's a whole movie trying to write in the shower, but I keep my speaker loud and I just freestyle, and then I write it down when I get out." She's spent more time than ever writing songs for her new album. She does, after all, have a legacy to build: "I just always want people to remember, 'Yes, Megan Thee Stallion, she was great, she was a rapper. She was one of the best rappers, the coldest.'"

Megan made a home of Criteria Studios in North Miami while recording the album, joining the company of the icons who have recorded there too – Aretha Franklin, Fleetwood Mac, AC/DC, Lil Wayne. When I meet her there in early March, she breezes in, her layers of cherry-red and black hair bouncing, with 4oe and Oneita darting behind her. She's bubbly and hot, tugging at her sleek nude sundress as we sit next to each other in soft, dark leather swivel chairs, a massive mixing console in front of us.

Shawn "Source" Jarrett – who has been Megan's engineer since he worked on 'Simon Says' from her breakout mixtape, *Fever* – sits at the console to play us some of the 25 to 30 songs Megan has recorded for the album. He calls Megan "sis" with casual affection, and gets her a fresh tea when she asks him to "pretty please" have the one she's sipping reheated.

"This song has a feature," Megan says, before Source cues up a new track called 'Pressurelicious'. It goes. The beat is dark and intense, and Megan's initial staccato raps are cool and sexy as she announces "*I'm stompin' on ho's so motherfuckin' hard I'm knockin' out Mario tokens*!" Source, jamming, throws an uppercut into the air when a digital chime punctuates the bar. Soon, Megan is joined on the song by Future, and the pair start trading bars.

Future is sometimes described as romantically toxic, but he's one of Megan's favourite rappers. "He just so fucking ratchet!" she says with a big laugh. "He is unapologetically himself. I appreciate that about anybody who gets up and has to do anything in the public eye. Anybody who has to read about their life online every day and deal with so many energies and can put it out into their music and do it gracefully, I feel like you deserve your flowers."

'Pressurelicious' is fun and hype, and when I catch up with her in May, Megan says her album could use more songs like it. "You know, the girls they be wanting to turn up," she says. Every time I talk to Megan, she's close to knowing just what she wants on the project.

She's particularly proud of the way 'Gift and Curse' layers personal revelation on top of exuberant dance music. Of the five songs she plays me, it's my favourite. Produced by Murda Beatz, it's shrouded in menacing piano and bouncing bass. After asserting her independence in the first verse, Megan gives a set of freaky shout-outs to sex organs and her dominion over them in the second – "*My motherfucking body, my choice/Ain't no lil dick taking my voice*."

The hook, though – "A *bitch like me, yeah, I know my worth/Fucking with me is a gift and a curse*" – is a glimpse into her psyche. "I can take care of myself. I'm so emotionally strong. I'm so independent," she explains later. "You know how easy it is for me to dismiss you, because I don't need you."

But she's also thinking about how these assets

can hurt her. "It's a gift that I'm so strong," she says, "but I feel like it's also a curse because it makes things get kind of lonely sometimes. Everybody's kind of like, 'Well, you good. You got it. I ain't messing with you.' So I feel like it makes people treat me not as delicate as I would like them to."

Her manager, T. Farris, is one of a handful of people whose musical critiques Megan says she considers now that her mum is no longer around. Farris tells me he likes 'Pressurelicious', 'Plan B', and 'Gift and Curse' as much as I did. "Those particular three records," he says, "are not really party records. They really have substance."

Farris was president of A&R and an artist manager for the Houston independent label Swishahouse, working closely with local stars Paul Wall and Mike Jones. Megan grew up on that sound. Farris is especially fond of 'Plan B', the explosive diss track to an unnamed ex that Megan premiered publicly onstage during Coachella's first weekend. (Megan is clear that the song is not about Lanez, despite online speculation.) "It gave me an old-school, Lil Kim feel," Farris says of the song. "I really love when Megan goes in, and just raps, and it's not about twerking. I always want people to understand that she's really one of the ones that can rap."

Farris is more than a manager to Megan; he's like a brother. "He probably is the only person who really knows exactly what I'm feeling and what's on my mind," she says. "When we up, we're jumping around, we're happy, with the puppies running. Then when I'm sad, he'll be like, 'OK, cry it out for a little bit, but we need to get up and get it together. You Megan Thee Stallion!' He really is my hype man."

Megan trusts Farris because he was one of the few people her mother trusted. They met Farris while he was working with 1501 Certified Entertainment, the label Megan signed to in 2018 before signing with a different label, 300 Entertainment, later that same year. (Since 2020, Megan has been fighting 1501 Certified in court, claiming she's locked in an "unconscionable" contract, and that the label has tried to prevent her from fulfilling the terms of it. In March, 1501 countersued, saying it is owed more music and money from the rapper.) "My momma didn't like anybody in life," Megan explains. "So when she liked T. Farris, I was like, 'This man might be an angel.'"

Megan's mum constantly permeates her thoughts, and on her new song 'Anxiety', she confronts the loss more candidly than she ever has on wax. 'Anxiety' is not one of Megan's best-sounding songs — its beat is a little too simple and saccharine — but it's one of her most open. Part of a verse includes a letter she wishes she could send to her mum in heaven: "*I would tell her sorry that I really been wildin', and ask her to forgive me cuz I really been trying*," she raps.

In one of their last conversations, Megan's mother gave her a pep talk. Holly was in the hospital in Houston, just informed she had a brain tumour, while Megan was expected to fly to LA for a show. "She was like, 'Megan, I don't want you to miss this opportunity just because I'm sick. I don't want that to stop you from being Megan Thee Stallion. You need to take Farris and y'all need to go to LA.'"

Megan stayed with her mother until midnight that evening, when her mum believed she was taking off to make the show. "Hell no, I wasn't leaving my momma," Megan says. "I just didn't want to stress her out. I just wanted to go home, take a bath real quick, and I was going to come back." Around two hours later, Megan got a call that her mother was unresponsive. Soon, she was gone.

Holly's final encouragement has stuck with Megan. So have Holly's taste, critiques, and faith in her. "When I make music, I always scratch the first draft because I feel my momma would've scratched it for me. So I'm like, 'OK, go harder than that,'" she says. Those memories hold her up, as does the example she feels she needs to set for Holly's mother, her grandmother Madlyn. "Ever since my mom and my great-grandma passed, she's been really depressed," says Megan. "I don't want to show her that anything is getting to me because I don't want it to get to her."

"I'M GOING TO BE A LIT-ASS GRANDMA," SHE SAYS, IMAGINING HERSELF AT 70. "STILL GOING TO BE LIKE, 'YES, I STILL GOT THE GOOD KNEES!' I GOT A LINEAGE OF GOOD KNEES"

In May, around the time of the Met Gala, Megan flew Madlyn to New York from Houston for her birthday, which they celebrated with a dinner attended by all of their small family, as a surprise. They cried and ate and laughed. Megan felt happy. She felt normal. She felt at peace.

MEGAN WANTS TO reclaim her story and tell it her way. That's one of the goals for her new album. There's also a docuseries on her rise in the works, too, and Netflix is developing a comedy series loosely based on her life, the product of a first-look production deal. Megan plans to write for the show, and she's working toward a directorial career, too. Also on her to-do list: making more cinematic music videos. Last year's 'Thot Shit' clip, in which a hypocritically sexist legislator is terrorised by Megan and a pack of twerking working-class women, was gorgeous, funny, weird, and thought-provoking — and Megan says it's just a taste of what's to come.

I ask her to look even further ahead: to her sunset years, after a life on the biggest stages and behind the scenes. "I feel I'm going to be a lit-ass grandma," she replies. "Still going to be like, 'Yes, I still got the good knees!' What? I got a lineage of good knees. It's like my daughter, her daughter, her daughter-daughter. It's just going to be a bunch of us just lit-ass beautiful Black women!"

In the meantime, Megan is dating Pardison Fontaine, an artist and songwriter who's worked with Cardi B and contributed to the 'Savage' remix. ("Not my part," Megan clarifies.) They have a creative partnership. "I feel like he's so good. And he feels like I'm so good," Megan says. "There are always instrumentals playing. So if I can hear him rapping, I'll be like, 'OK, I'm going to do better than that.' Or if he likes the beat that I'm playing, he'll be like, 'Hey, let me get that beat.' We sharpen each other."

Online, they are goofy together and proud of each other. In March, Fontaine, known casually as Pardi, posted a celebratory reel that captured Megan dancing, performing, posing, and achieving. It showed clips of her college graduation, her defiant *Saturday Night Live* performance, and her humanitarian award from Houston Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, all set to his song 'Hoop Earrings', where he raps, "*If you a Black girl, do your thing*."

"I appreciate him for loving on me even when I don't feel like I love me," Megan tells me. Though she seems happy with Fontaine, her trauma can be a block. "I have a lot of anxiety, and I know I'm probably depressed on some level. I'll be like, 'Damn, you really sticking through it?'" she says of him. "'I really want to be good for you

because I'm trying to be good for myself.' But I just... I don't know. Right now, I really don't know, because sometimes I don't feel good about me. So I feel like it's hard to be in a relationship when you are not loving on yourself right."

And yet, Megan has taken incredible strides to stand up for herself and people like her. During that *SNL* performance, three months after her shooting, she protested the minuscule charge levied against an officer involved in the death of Breonna Taylor, then spoke to the crowd: "We need to protect our Black women. And love our Black women, 'cos at the end of the day, we need our Black women." Shortly after, she penned an op-ed, published in *The New York Times,* focusing on Black women's sociopolitical achievements and setbacks, and contextualising her own experiences among them. "You know what?" she wrote. "I'm not afraid of criticism."

Her late great-grandmother instilled a sense of social responsibility in her. "I would always see her from outside her front door, giving out money to the kids that would walk past the house. Any family members, any of her friends, she was always helping," she says. "She lived in the hood, but she felt so rich. I know money didn't make her, she made money. I always wanted to be like her."

After leaving a trail of philanthropy – from donating $8,000 to help fund a fallen fan's funeral to six- and seven-figure giving campaigns in partnership with Popeyes and Fashion Nova – Megan launched the Pete & Thomas Foundation, named in honour of her parents. Self-funded for now, it focuses on education and housing, as well as health and wellness.

There are the things that have happened to Megan Thee Stallion. Then there are the things – the beautiful, awe-inspiring, culture-shifting things – she's made happen for herself. It's been only three years since her breakthrough single, 'Big Ole Freak', hit the charts. It's been only three years since she dropped *Fever,* her riotous venture into the mainstream, where she declared that the only thing we need to know about her is that she's in love with money. She then found her every move and trauma under a microscope, and saw as many people celebrating her tragic losses as her momentous wins.

When I ask Megan what, exactly, she would like people to know about her life now, she pauses. "OK, yes, I very much went through that," she says after a moment. "Yes, it's very fucked up, but I'm still me. Look at everything I can accomplish and everything I can do in the face of it. I'm still not letting nothing knock me down to take me off my game. So you shouldn't let nothing take you off your game, either. Because if I can get through this shit, you could get through your shit." ®

DRESS BY **AFFFAIR HAUTE COUTURE,** JEWELLERY BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**

블랙핑크 저널리즘 문제

BLACKPINK

From strangers to sisters to pop supernovas

By Haeryun Kang

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Peter Ash Lee

IN AN OTHERWISE ORDINARY Seoul neighbourhood, the headquarters of YG Entertainment rise like a giant spaceship above the Han River. YG is one of South Korea's largest entertainment agencies, producing international K-pop stars, as well as, more recently, actors and models. Opened in 2020, its new complex extends nine stories above ground and five below. The upper floors are brightly lit and open: meeting rooms with huge windows, an employee cafeteria, even a pho restaurant. Hundreds of YG employees walk busily about. There are screens everywhere, showcasing YG's huge roster.

The underground floors feel more like a secret den. This is where artists practise in dance studios, record music, and trainees mingle with the stars. And it's where Blackpink, the world's most popular girl group, are recording songs for their next album, their first since the early days of the pandemic. Once the album (due some time later this year) is complete, the flurry of activity will start again, giving the YG employees something new to buzz about and sending the lives of the group's four members – Jennie, Jisoo, Lisa and Rosé – into overdrive.

Jennie, who like her bandmates on this April afternoon is dressed down and wearing very little makeup, takes a deep breath before describing what's ahead. "These days... I think every day, 'OK, how do I prepare myself for my next busy two years?'" she says, alternating between Korean and English. After the interview, she'll hop on a flight to attend Coachella and stop by the LA flagship store for the eyewear brand Gentle Monster. She's an ambassador for the brand, as well as Chanel. The other three members have similar gigs, for the likes of Celine (Lisa), Saint Laurent (Rosé), Dior (Jisoo), and more. Just earlier this year, all four were gallivanting around Paris, with front-row seats at fashion week.

Blackpink are one of the most popular artists to ever come out of South Korea. They're the most-followed music act on YouTube; on the streets of Seoul, you see them everywhere, from tiny screens in elevators to billboards on skyscrapers. Even the South Korean president has credited the group, among other cultural exports, for "giving hope and happiness to many around the world". In the US, Blackpink have filled arenas and collaborated with stars like Lady Gaga and Cardi B. "From the management and business side, we did have our view and vision to the States and outside of Asia," says Daniel Hong, the CEO of YG's US branch. "Who doesn't want to perform in the States?"

Their last LP, called simply *The Album*, sold

PRODUCED BY KATT KIM AT MOTHER; SET DESIGN BY MINKYU JEON; FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA; STYLING BY MINHEE PARK; HAIR BY SUNYOUNG LEE; MAKEUP BY MYUNGSUN LEE; OPENER FROM LEFT: JISOO WEARS FULL OUTFIT BY DIOR, SHOES, STYLIST'S PERSONAL ITEM, JEWELLERY BY CARTIER; LISA WEARS FULL OUTFIT BY CELINE, SHOES BY CELINE, JEWELLERY BY BVLGARI; JENNIE WEARS FULL OUTFIT BY CHANEL, SHOES, STYLIST'S PERSONAL ITEM, JEWELLERY BY CHANEL; ROSÉ WEARS FULL OUTFIT BY SAINT LAURENT, SHOES BY SAINT LAURENT, JEWELLERY BY TIFFANY & CO.; RIGHT: TOP AND BOTTOM BY MUGLER

리사

Lisa

JUMPSUIT BY MUGLER, SHOES BY AMBUSH

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around 1.2 million copies in less than a month after its 2020 release, making Blackpink the first million-selling K-pop girl group. In the first quarter of 2021, YG reported an 84 per cent jump in revenue over the previous year, largely thanks to Blackpink. Their massive success is part of the Korean Wave, which refers loosely to the global popularity of South Korea's cultural industry.

"I feel proud of them, like I am being loved," says Jeong Yujung, a 23-year-old from Busan, South Korea. Yujung is a Blink, one of the millions of Blackpink fans around the world. "When I see them being photographed or performing with these global stars, I feel proud. Of course, the disadvantage is we don't see them as often in Korea."

Blackpink's music projects an explosive, larger-than-life force that's both invigorating and addictive. They make serious bangers, mixing powerful hip-hop beats with house, EDM, and more. Their videos are filled with bursts of colour and inventive dancing, embodying YG's characteristic dedication to "swag" — a term emblazoned in large letters in one of the company's bathrooms — and fiercely independent womanhood. "Rather than emphasising how cute or feminine they are," Yujung notes, "Blackpink's confidence seems to stem from a certainty about themselves as individuals. Like, 'If you don't like me, you'll regret it! I'm lovable and cool, you just don't know it.'"

In person, Blackpink are more down-to-earth. They're prone to laughter, constantly talking over one another. "My mum and dad are proud of me, but I don't feel like a world star," says Jisoo in Korean, chatting in a conference room and wearing a beige mask she occasionally pulls down to slurp on iced coffee. "I'm the same person that started training in high school. My social standing may have changed, but to me, I'm just… too me."

"More than anyone, we want to be ordinary girls," says Jennie. "Sure, there are times when we talk about what kind of influence we could have. But what we actually love is talking about our cats, dogs, good food and pretty places."

Blackpink come from diverse backgrounds. Lisa (real name: Lalisa Manobal), 25, is from Thailand, a dancer and rapper who spits fierce rhymes in multiple languages. Rosé (Roseanne Chaeyoung Park), also 25, was born in New Zealand and grew up in

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Australia. She's the guitar-playing, high-note-hitting main vocalist with the "golden voice", as fans love to point out. Twenty-six-year-old Jennie Kim, the group's main rapper, grew up in Seoul and New Zealand, before joining YG in 2010. She's been living in Seoul with her mother for the past year. There's no leader in Blackpink, but sometimes Jennie feels like one, calm and collected, often answering the more difficult questions on behalf of the group. And 27-year-old Jisoo Kim grew up in Gunpo, about 20 miles south of YG headquarters; she's the lead vocalist and an expert harmoniser, both quick-witted and philosophical in interviews.

These days, Blackpink are spending as much of this comparatively quiet time as possible with family and friends. "I feel like I'm recharging myself," says Jisoo. "My life these days is not too busy, because we're not actively performing yet. I want to come back with music quickly. I live alone, but my parents are in the same apartment building, so we share meals together."

THE LIFE OF A TRAINEE CAN BE a tough one. "We had the same problems," says Jisoo, "so it was better to talk to each other"

Lisa recently returned to Bangkok for the first time in three years, to celebrate her birthday. "My mum and dad are getting old," she says wistfully, speaking in both English and Korean. "Whenever I have time, I want to return to Thailand. I don't want to waste my time. I want to see them as often as I can."

Rosé, who had Covid four weeks ago, apologises for her dry cough while munching fried rice at the pho restaurant. As a child in Melbourne, she would play piano and guitar and sing until so late that her parents and sister Alice (who all live in Seoul now) had to take turns telling her to stop. She recently picked up her guitar for the first time in ages. In both Korean and English, she talks about recording her voice on an iPad, exploring and playing and experimenting. "I hadn't been doing that for the past two or three months," she says. "Caught up in life. I even told my mum, 'I want to be by myself for the next few days.' So she didn't come over."

Despite their massive success, Blackpink's path wasn't easy. And while cats, dogs, good food and pretty places are indeed topics of discussion, they are also figuring out larger questions about their music, their individual voices and who they are.

OUTSIDE YG'S BUSTLING HQ, amid small, independent shops, "We wash your cars by hand" signs, and an unmemorable apartment building called "Korea Proud", life is quieter. Cherry blossoms fall like snow over the alleyways of the Hapjeong-dong neighbourhood. This area was Blackpink's adolescence. They spent their teenage years as trainees here: living away from their families, singing, rapping and practising dance routines for more than 12 hours a day. They were hell-bent on getting to release music and perform in public. "Debut, debut, debut," Lisa says. "That was the only thing on our minds."

"We were on survival mode," says Jennie. "Every month, our friends were forced to leave, go home. Getting stressed? Having it rough? Those feelings were a luxury. What mattered was debuting."

YG Entertainment, founded in 1996, has produced international K-pop hits like BigBang and 2NE1, both precursors to Blackpink. All four members of Blackpink passed auditions to become trainees; all came to YG at different times. Jennie was around the longest, spending six years as a trainee before the group debuted with the singles 'Whistle' and 'Boombayah' in 2016. Jisoo trained for five years, as did Lisa, who left Bangkok to become a trainee in 2011. Rosé joined in 2012, ranking first among 700 contestants in a YG audition in Sydney. At 15, she left her family and life in Melbourne behind and walked into YG's headquarters carrying the same guitar she still plays today. "That guitar is over 10 years old now," she notes. "It's older than my dog, Hank."

That was the day all four girls met, jamming in the YG dormitory kitchen in their pyjamas until dawn. Many other trainees would cycle through the project in the years-long process of forming Blackpink, but somehow, fortuitously, the final four members were assigned to the same dorm in those early days. Rosé had just said a teary goodbye to her parents when she met her bandmates. "I think Jennie said, 'Chaeyoung, play something for us!'" remembers Rosé, whose friends call her both Chaeyoung and Rosé (pronounced "Rosie"). "So we sat around the kitchen table with my guitar. Jisoo was great at harmonising."

"We started out sitting in chairs and then gradually went up onto the table," Lisa says, laughing, during a group interview. "Everyone was like '*Wooooo*.' It was so much fun."

"My seat was facing the kitchen window; I remember the sun rising," says Jisoo.

"Gosh, we're lucky our neighbours didn't complain," giggles Rosé.

"You know, if you'd gone to bed early that day, you might have felt sadder," Jennie tells Rosé thoughtfully.

In that three-bedroom apartment with the white walls faded to ivory, the four girls shared two rooms, while their manager slept in the other one. They played Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide who would use the single bathroom first in the morning.

"Going grocery shopping was so fun," remembers Rosé. "We'd cook together after a long day of training. Nothing spectacular, all frozen stuff. But I still miss the taste of that food."

"I made scrambled eggs with milk," says Jennie.

"And we ate that with strawberry jam," adds Rosé. "It was delicious."

They needed that kind of camaraderie, because the life of a trainee can be demanding. K-pop's trainee systems, inspired by Motown in the US and Johnny's Entertainment in Japan, come under frequent scrutiny. There's no guarantee of ever succeeding, which means trainees can remain in limbo for years. The curriculum differs from agency to agency; at YG, the future Blackpink members underwent a rigorous monthly testing system, where trainees performed solo and in teams for judges, developing everything from their own choreography to styling.

"When was this going to end? Like, when? Do we have to get tested every single month?" says Lisa, who initially didn't speak Korean but is now fluent. "I'd call my mum [in Thailand], wanting to quit, and she'd tell me to hang on just another year, just hang on."

DRESS BY CHLOE, BRACELET BY CHANEL

제니

Jennie

지수

Jisoo

"If I was going through a hard time, I'd go to the bathroom, sob my heart out, then on to the next thing," says Rosé. "I was on autopilot or something. If you told me to do that again, I could never."

In addition to long working hours, there are different restrictions on trainees' lifestyles. Blackpink were forbidden from dating, driving, and drinking, though it's not clear how strictly they followed the rules. Rosé once said on *Radio Star,* a Korean TV show, "These bans were negotiable with the company. They just didn't want us to do them behind their backs."

The members say they received classes devoted to mental health, as well as therapy, but ultimately, they weren't helpful. "We had the same problems, so it was better to talk to each other," says Jisoo.

"We just endured," adds Jennie.

THE DIFFICULT PARTS of Blackpink's journey — and the immensity of their achievements — fade into the background when the members are all together. A few days before we meet at YG, they're all sitting in an unadorned waiting room between photo shoots. (In case you were wondering, the members prefer to have their left side photographed, except Jisoo, who prefers her right.) When Rosé points out the lipstick on Lisa's teeth, the latter grins back with an extra-toothy smile. Jisoo squeals when a mosquito flies her way, while Jennie makes fake nails with empty pistachio shells. They shriek with laughter, reminiscing about the trainee days as the room fills with the noise and warmth of a family kitchen.

Back in their trainee days, the members would sometimes devise schemes to skip practice. One episode revolved around Potato Teacher, a longtime YG choreographer who taught Blackpink to dance. (Potato, whose real name is Kim Hee Jung, got her nickname in elementary school, at a time when, for some reason, it was trendy to refer to your classmates by the names of fruits and vegetables.) "She was considered a legend, so everybody was scared of her," Rosé says.

"But we were dancing literally every single day. Sometimes we really, really wanted to take a break," begins Jisoo. "So one day..."

"No, you wouldn't," Lisa shrieks, laughing.

"...we took out one of the cables."

"*Arrrrgh*!" Lisa shouts, a feeble, last attempt to protect their secret.

"We took out one of the many cables connected to the speaker, and said, 'Huh? Why isn't the music coming out?'" Jisoo continues, undeterred. "Our class was an hour long. The engineer eventually came and fixed it, within 30 minutes."

"But even those 30 minutes were so precious, so precious," says Jennie.

"We were such a problematic group," Rosé says, cracking up.

"I don't think Potato Teacher knows about this story, to this day," says Jisoo.

BLACKPINK ARE INVOLVED in every step of the creative process, from conceptual brainstorming to final styling. They're co-writers on smashes like 'Lovesick Girls' and many others, as well as on their solo singles, some of which are massive hits.

"We don't just receive a completed song," says Jisoo. "We are involved from the beginning, building the blocks, adding this or that feeling, exchanging feedback – and this process of creating makes me feel proud of our music. If we just received pre-made songs, it would feel mechanical. I feel more love for the process, because we say, 'How about adding this in the lyrics? How about adding this move in the choreography?'"

"OUR HIP-HOP ISN'T THE rebellious kind," Jennie says. "What hip-hop is this? I don't know. It's just cool!"

At the heart of their music is Teddy Park, Blackpink's main producer. "Blackpink in your area!" the iconic phrase that pops up in many of their singles, was Park's doing.

"Oppa directs all of Blackpink," says Lisa, using the honourific for an older man. "He knows us incredibly well," she says. "He pushes us hard. 'Again, again, again,' he'd say."

"He'll just randomly call me one day, 'Yo, Jennie, we gotta step up,'" says Jennie. "He's like an alarm, reminding us to keep moving musically. All he has to do is call, 'Hey, what's up?' and I'll be like, 'Oh, my God,' tensing up. But it's a good tension that Blackpink needs."

A Korean American from Los Angeles, Park gained mainstream fame in Korea in the late 90s, first as a rapper in the YG-produced hip-hop boy band 1TYM. The group is often seen as a precursor to BigBang, combining rap, dance, and the good looks typical of K-pop idol groups. "Teddy is hip-hop down to his bones," says Jennie. "And we inherited that."

It's hard to talk about K-pop without mentioning its beating heart of hip-hop. MTV, launched in 1981, was broadcast in South Korea through AFKN, the US military's broadcasting service in South Korea. American GIs and Koreans danced to everything from New Jack Swing to Michael Jackson in nightclubs near Seoul's US military base. Seo Taiji and Boys, a critical precursor to today's K-pop idols, began their career through dance battles at Moon Night in the Itaewon neighbourhood.

"The history of hip-hop in Korea did not begin with rappers and DJs; it did with dancers performing to New Jack Swing," writes blogger T.K. Teddy and music critic Youngdae Kim in *Vulture*. "The fact that the cradle of hip-hop in Korea was the dance club has deep implications that can be seen to this day in mainstream K-pop... the identity of Korean hip-hop as dance music flowed into the mainstream K-pop idol groups, particularly through the producer YG."

Yang Hyun-suk, one of the boys (in Seo Taiji and Boys) and a legendary competitor at Moon Night, would later found YG Entertainment, around the time Korean pop started looking beyond its borders. The agency created hip-hop groups like Jinusean and 1TYM, and found success through BigBang in the mid-00s. (Hyun-suk resigned in 2019 amid a slew of allegations involving some of the label's biggest stars, including sex trafficking and covering up a drug scandal.)

Park rarely gives interviews. In 2013, he told Korean news site OSEN that he goes to bed at 9 a.m. and wakes up at 3 p.m., making music during most of his waking hours. Although Park has been behind many of the biggest chart-topping hits in Korean pop,

DRESS BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, SHOES, STYLIST'S PERSONAL ITEM

he says he doesn't like chart-topping songs, because "I want to eat food that was made by hand in a worn-out store, rather than a franchise dish that sells like it has wings."

Korean hip-hop is more than K-pop idols — think legends like Deux, the Movement Crew, Verbal Jint — but YG's brand, with Park at the centre, is undeniably one of the most globally popular. Blackpink's potent, inventive sound combines the YG spirit of swag and self-confidence with moments of vulnerability and inventive beats. 'Love to Hate Me' recalls 00s R&B; 'How You Like That' is permeated by trap rhythms and catchy, repeating one-liners (common in Blackpink songs). 'Crazy Over You' packs in retro hip-hop beats, Balkan touches, and tricky lines — "*Simple is so, so, I need that oh no/Don't you know I'm loco*" — expertly rapped by Lisa.

"Hip-hop is in my blood," says Lisa, who went solo for the first time with a single written by Park. 'Lalisa' is infused with a maximalist mix of rap, EDM, brass riffs and even traditional Thai instruments. Another solo single, 'Money', dethroned Drake to take the top spot on *Billboard*'s Rap Digital Songs Sales chart.

"I don't think hip-hop is just about rapping. Look at Rihanna, she could make anything hip-hop. Hip-hop means something different to everyone," says Jennie, who loves Brockhampton (and just saw them at Coachella).

"To me, it's the spirit of cool – vibes, swag, whatever words you can use. I think Blackpink's hip-hop is something the world hasn't seen before," she continues. "We, four girls in their twenties from different backgrounds, are using Korean and English to weave pop music with a hip-hop base. Maybe if the really cool rappers in America, who do 'real hip-hop,' look at us, it can seem a little like kids doing things. Our hip-hop isn't the rebellious kind, but we are doing something very cool. What hip-hop is this? I don't know! It's just cool!"

JISOO SITS in the YG conference room, high above the mighty Han. Known as the funny one within the group, she's quiet and serious today, thinking about big questions and wearing a cap that says "As time goes by it will be better". Jisoo's the only member who hasn't released solo music, though there's buzz she might some time this year. "I'm not sure how much I want to go solo yet," she says. "The music I listen to, the music I can do, and the music I want to do — what should I choose? I love songs with lots of instruments. I love different bands and rock music. What do people want from me? There's a chaos of conflicting questions."

There's no indication Blackpink is anything but full speed ahead, but behind the veneer of pop perfection, the artists are still figuring out their paths as individual musicians. Each has solo activities: Jisoo acts, and the other three have released singles, including some massive hits — although the sounds don't stray too far from Blackpink's sonic palette, with Park involved in most of the songs.

"Is hip-hop the only thing I'm good at?" wonders Lisa. "What if it turns out I'm also good at traditional Thai music?" Her 2021 solo single 'Lalisa' incorporated different Thai visuals and sounds, and she points to artists like Rosalía as an exemplar: "Rosalía is so cool. She has her own Spanish culture, that's inside her person, that influences her music.... I'm curious to know how much I can expand what I do. Music-wise, dance-wise, I feel like I still have to learn more."

"The Jennie you've seen so far has been practice," says Jennie, the first member to go solo, in 2018, with the single 'Solo', on which she mixes mellow vocals with her characteristically swaggering rap (the video has more than 800 million views on YouTube). "I have so many things I like... I love vocals, rap, dance. I can contain all of that in a single song. I have that diversity."

Fun or not, making music is full of pressure, as the foursome recall during a break from the photo shoot. "The most fun is before we start making it," Jisoo says with a laugh.

"Or when it's in the past," says Jennie, giggling.

"When I recorded something for the first time," Rosé says, "I was so excited. I didn't know any better, so it was fun. I envy that now. Now, no matter how hard I try, a part of me is never satisfied."

"That's an occupational disease," Lisa tells Rosé. "And I feel exactly the same."

Jisoo loves creating, loves building a song from scratch with an expert team. But she sometimes struggles with questions of purpose and the pressures of fame. "What do I exactly like?" she asks. "It's still a mystery. I love to perform, but I don't always enjoy being part of the spotlight. I think it's different for the other members: they love to receive the spotlight, feeling energised by the people who come to see us, and then getting a bit depressed when the stage is over and silence arrives. I'm a little different. When I'm onstage, I think about not making mistakes. Performing sometimes feels more like a test than something genuinely fun."

Lisa talks about a period of fighting with her own voice. "That whole year between 'As If It's Your Last' [2017] and 'Ddu-du Ddu-du' [2018] was rough for me," she says, sitting in a dimly lit recording studio on a basement floor of YG. "I couldn't sing. When I went to the studio to record, nothing came out. I cried. I felt like I was bringing the team down. Teddy pushed me hard: 'You can't? No. Try harder. Go back in there.' Because of Teddy, I overcame that time."

Jennie regularly does Pilates, yoga, boxing and other exercises to stay healthy. "For me, so far, when I'm good in my body, I feel happier and healthier in my mental health.... And have good people around you that you can trust," she adds. "And pets."

Now, Blackpink are revving up to launch new music — to unleash more bangers, to further cement their place as one of greatest girl groups of all time — with no end in sight. "I mean, won't Blackpink last at least 10 more years? We'll be nearly 40 by then," Lisa says. "Someday we'll get married and things like that. But then I see the Spice Girls, how they got together for a reunion concert. Can we do that too someday? Will I be able to dance then, like I do now?" Then she laughs in her characteristically hearty way.

"Even if we're 70 and we have different lives, I'll still feel like I'm Blackpink," says Jennie. "As corny as it sounds, I don't think Blackpink will ever end in my heart. It's a part of my family. You can't deny your family."

Last year, Rosé released her first solo single, 'On the Ground'. I ask what the lyric "*Everything I need is on the ground*" means to her. She pauses. Her shoulder-length blonde hair wisps around her face as her eyes narrow into focus. "Just us as people. A year and a half ago, maybe two, I remember us eating. It was the four of us and Teddy. We were just hungry people — we got to the restaurant, very hungry, and the food was really good. This is what makes us feel like people. Just us, eating with the people we love." ®

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JISOO, ROSÉ, JENNIE AND LISA

BOTH

Marshall's Ministry of Loud

Ever since masterminding the music industry's amp of choice 60 years ago, Marshall Amplification has enjoyed a lasting appeal to rival Paul McCartney. Having recently branched out into drums, set up its own thriving record label, and produced a rather covetable range of Marshall-branded fridges, this stalwart is no one-hit wonder, as Rolling Stone UK discovers...

BY **MARK SUTHERLAND**

AT FIRST GLANCE, Milton Keynes is an unlikely contender for rock'n'roll capital of the world. The Buckinghamshire city is more famous for concrete cows than making musical history. And yet, deep in the suburb of Bletchley, where Alan Turing and his colleagues once deciphered the Nazis' Enigma machine, another team of British experts have long since cracked the DNA code of loud.

Marshall Amplification has been here since 1966, when it was relocated by founder Jim Marshall, who started the business at his music shop in Hanwell, Ealing, in 1962, alongside son Terry Marshall. They opened a second shop in 1963, and the first Marshall factory in Hayes in 1964, before the move to Milton Keynes. A drummer by trade, Jim's move into amplification was encouraged by the likes of Pete Townshend and Ritchie Blackmore, later of The Who and Deep Purple respectively, who came to the shop looking for an amp that could handle their distinctively heavy styles.

The first amp Marshall ever made still sits proudly in a glass case in the treasure trove that is the Marshall museum, located at the entrance to the Milton Keynes factory. A vast empire has sprung from that collection of valves and knobs, known as 'Amp Number One', aka Marshall's very first JTM45. The

Marshall
JCM 900

famous, stage-dominating Marshall stack — two 4x12" speaker cabinets on top of each other — followed in 1965, again at Townshend's behest, and the brand, still 100 per cent independent, now incorporates everything from headphones to a drum company (Natal), a record label, a live booking agency — and even Marshall-branded fridges and craft beer.

Yet the distinctive amps — almost always with a black case, gold controls and white logo — remain at the heart of the enterprise. And, although the technology is ever evolving, the manufacturing process is not so different from Jim Marshall's day ('The Father of Loud' passed away in 2012, aged 88). Walk the shop floor and, alongside the machinery's heavy metal thunder, it's notable how many people, rather than machines, are involved. Many amps are still hand-tooled by 200-plus employees, who make around 400 products each week. There's now another Marshall owned-and-operated factory in Vietnam, but unlike many other brands, that too follows the exact same, painstaking process as its UK counterpart.

"It's that personal touch that makes every single bit of kit Marshall makes unique," enthuses Simon Neil, lead singer and guitarist with Scottish rock behemoths Biffy Clyro. "When we go to America and need a Marshall, we know that head [muso speak for 'amplifier'] has come from the factory and that's really important."

LOUD AND PROUD
Jim Marshall, The Father of Loud, who started the company at his music shop in Hanwell, Ealing, in 1962

MARSHALLING SUCCESS
Nova Twins Amy Love and Georgia South, who signed to Marshall Records last year, gave them their first Top 30 album hit in June with *Supernova,* recorded in the company's state-of-the-art studio

Behind every great musician is a great amp — and in most cases it's a Marshall. In 1966, the brand went global when Jimi Marshall Hendrix first played through a stack, after a venue refused to let him use his own amp. He then demanded an introduction to the man who shared his (middle) name. Other famous fans include Slash from Guns N' Roses, Oasis, Bring Me The Horizon, Beabadoobee and Kendrick Lamar.

"It's going to be cockroaches and Marshall amps at the end of the world"
— *Neil*

"Slash, Kurt Cobain… My heroes always had a Marshall stack behind them," recalls Neil. "From being 12 years old looking at those pictures, I wanted to dress like that, have a guitar like that and an amplifier like that. And, even though the world changes and I could never be Slash, it's still something to aspire to…"

As soon as Neil made any money from playing music, he bought a Marshall head and cab. "There was something about the romance of plugging into that that made me feel like a real musician," he laughs. "I no longer felt like a pretender; I belonged on stage. Like, I've got the gear, now it's up to me to not fuck it up!"

Biffy Clyro's rise means that Neil — like his heroes — is also a Marshall devotee. But these days the brand appeals far beyond its traditional cohort of hard rock and heavy metal legends.

Its consumer electronics business (launched in 2010) has opened it up to new demographics; its education division (headed by former Gallows guitarist Steph Carter) reaches out to the next generation of musicians; and its booking agency (which opened last year) and record label (five years earlier) represent distinctly diverse rosters.

Veteran executive Steve Tannett, the brand's music director, who cut his teeth on Miles

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MARSHALL, ALAMY

Copeland's IRS Records in the 70s and 80s, was brought in to set up Marshall Records, which is now managed by Peter Capstick. He says the label was always going to break the rock mould.

"It's not just going to be guys with Marshall stacks and Les Paul guitars," says Tannett. "We might have some of that, but we're also going to have really interesting artists, because people who plug guitars into amplifiers don't all make music like that.

"That's why we're so pleased at the variety of artists, from the endorser side to the people recording in our studio to the artists we're releasing on our label. We're not just one genre. All right, we're not making dance records, but if you plug your guitar into a Marshall amp and we like your sound, then that's what we're about."

STILL SOUND (Above) Celebrating the company's milestone anniversary; (left) Biffy Clyro frontman Simon Neil is a Marshall devotee

HISTORY LESSON Rare exhibits on show at The 60 Years of Marshall exhibition at Milton Keynes Museum

Rising stars Nova Twins are one of those bands. Singer-guitarist Amy Love and bassist Georgia South are about as far away from rock cliché as you can get: two young Black women playing a riotous fusion of punk and grime. They signed to Marshall Records last year and in June delivered the label's first Top 30 album with *Supernova*, recorded in the brand's state-of-the-art studio, which can double as a 250-capacity venue and even has its own bar. ("There are plenty of studios that aren't in a car park in Milton Keynes," quips studio manager Adam Beer as he shows us around, "so we had to make this a very special place.") Love even blagged one of those sought-after Marshall fridges (which look just like the amps) to give someone as a gift.

"When you think of Marshall you think of heritage acts and those black amps," says Love.

"Our deal together is a new way of doing things for both of us"
— *Love*

"But what's really cool with our venture with them is they're changing their perspective. Our deal together is a new way of doing things for both of us. It's really forward-thinking."

"Whether it's a speaker, a fridge or a mug, the Marshall brand is so strong," adds South. "So it's cool that they're expanding with new bands – grassroots bands and women musicians."

The Nova Twins deal, as with all Marshall contracts, features a 75/25 royalty split in the artist's favour (much more generous than the traditional major record company deal).

"We're a business, but it's all about artists first," says Tannett. "Artists coming to us don't have to be preoccupied by thinking the record label's going to make all the money. Our main objective is to get them as profitable as they can be, as quickly as possible."

Tannett believes Nova Twins could be Marshall Records' first stadium-sized superstars. Also signed to the label are maverick artists such as rock-influenced rapper Kid Bookie (who turned up at Marshall Records' Soho office demanding a deal — "I said, 'I guess we'd better sign him then,'" laughs Tannett) and punk teens Noah and the Loners, alongside classic rockers Bad Touch and renowned alt-rockers Therapy?.

The rise of Marshall Records has happily coincided with the emergence of a new wave of rock fans.

"We played Slam Dunk and it was the most diverse festival we've ever seen, in the crowds and on the stages," says South.

"There's a reason rock, metal and alternative music are reviving," adds Love, "it's because new people are being allowed in."

Tannett, meanwhile, believes rock is "more important now than for the last 20 years" and Neil agrees.

"It's not just greasy blokes with low-cut T-shirts any more," says the Biffy Clyro frontman. "I don't mind a bit of that, but the reason guitar and amplifier sales have been going through the roof is because young people who'd maybe have been too intimidated before can now make their music, loud and proud.

"Marshall knows what it's doing," he adds. "We don't need any more 50-year-old white guys playing rock'n'roll — and I say that as an almost 50-year-old white guy playing rock. I want to feel that change. But I love that the guitar has become a way to express yourself again."

And whenever musicians hit the road, Marshall will be right there with them.

"You never have a problem with Marshall gear," says Neil. "It can gig properly. Marshall has the stamina and – I realise I'm about to describe an inanimate object as having the mental acuity to survive a fucking tour — but it does. It feels bulletproof; there's something military about it that means it will survive you. It's going to be cockroaches and Marshall amps at the end of the world."

Tannett, meanwhile, isn't planning quite that far ahead, happily celebrating one Diamond Jubilee while working towards another very loud 60 years. "We're a successful business," he says. "People like our products and we've expanded. But there isn't a moment when we aren't thinking that we must maintain the same quality and ethos that have allowed us to last 60 years. With a bit of luck, in 60 years, Rolling Stone UK will be writing about 120 years of Marshall. Because Marshall looks forward; it doesn't look back." ®

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Reviews

Music

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Beabadoobee explores new territory on her second album

Beabadoobee

Beatopia

Dirty Hit

★★★★☆

ALTHOUGH BEABADOOBEE — aka Beatrice Laus — was born this side of the millennium, much of her output so far harks back to the sounds of the 90s, and the kind of lip-curling indie-rock that could easily headline Kat Stratford's favourite venue in *10 Things I Hate About You*. While her earliest releases drew on the outsider folk-rock of Daniel Johnston and smuggled a smarting dollop of teenage angst into hushed delivery ("*They're making me sick*," she sang on 'Angry Song', "*just go suck my dick*"), 2020's debut album *Faking It Flowers* paired the same lyrical directness with glossier production and the volume cranked up. Laus was adept at capturing →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Joely Dean

the giddiness of infatuation and a shuddering rage, but sheer directness sometimes came at the expense of further exploration and grit. On songs like 'Horen Sarrison' ("*You are the smell of pavement after the rain*"), Laus hinted at the further growth that could come from abandoning generalisations in favour of something more specific.

Named after the crayon-sketched secret world that Laus created as a child, *Beatopia* certainly makes that leap. Opening with this utopian realm's Inspiral Carpets-esque theme tune, 'Beatopia Cultsong' sets the surreal and fairly low-key tone. The grunge-laden 'Talk' and the sugary spikes of '10.36' feel like the most immediate tracks, but they're also outliers on a record that mostly favours something more introspective. Indeed, much of *Beatopia* is a record about finding yourself through being alone. "*Feelin' blue*," she sings on 'See You Soon', "*I'd rather have a meaning*."

Where previous Beabadoobee releases have felt drenched in nostalgia, *Beatopia* instead reinterprets threads from the past before knitting them into new forms, and the Matty Healy-featuring 'Pictures of Us' — which initially channels the spiny interplay of US emo bands like Slint and American Football — later soars upwards into a spaced-out vocal dreamscape. "*I don't think I can do it*," Laus sings gently, caught adrift. Softly urging herself to drink water and smoke less, 'Fairy Song' feels like pop-punk trying to sprint through a vat of viscous gunge. The foot-scuffing melodies of 'Sunny Day', meanwhile, sound like All Saints trying their hand at US indie.

Occasionally, *Beatopia*'s momentum slows — 'Lovesong' feels particularly dampened down and sluggish. Although Laus's lyrics visibly dig into deeper places, they don't always connect. The tech metaphors of 'Broken CD' make little sense ("*Got a broken CD / that plays constantly,*" she sings with the optimism of a person who has never spent hours scrubbing a scratched album with toothpaste) and lines can feel chosen for their pleasing cadence rather than the genuine newness they unearth.

That said, it remains a far more exploratory second record with a cohesive, slightly surrealist, mood unifying its 14 tracks — and stand-outs like the orchestral 'Ripples' and 'Talk' deftly show that Laus can tackle both emotional heft and swaggering bravado. It feels like a real step up. **EL HUNT**

KASABIAN'S SECOND ACT

Two years after their frontman left, the band is back and better than ever with their strongest work yet

Kasabian

The Alchemist's Euphoria

Sony Music

★★★★☆

WHEN EX-KASABIAN FRONTMAN Tom Meighan left the group in 2020 under the darkest of clouds, few would have blamed the band for calling it a day after a career that had seen them slowly graduate from Leicester lads to Glastonbury-topping rock giants.

But, as Serge Pizzorno told Rolling Stone UK earlier this year, their former bandmate's domestic abuse conviction would have been "an awful way for it to end".

"We realised this is what we do. This is our life's work, and every tune is ingrained in our soul and heart," he explained.

Forthcoming album release *The Alchemist's Euphoria* sees Pizzorno fly out of the traps to impress on us that he's the perfect man to lead the band.

"*Take me to a time that we all could believe in, shut your door on the way if you're leaving*," comes his mission statement on psych-tinged opener 'Alchemist'. It feels like a chance for a newly cocksure Pizzorno to brazenly tell off cynics who aren't on board for this new chapter of Kasabian.

This line-up change seems to have strengthened the band. The rest of the record feels like their most sonically varied and at times best work in years, after a few middling albums.

Early standout 'Rocket Fuel' sees the group experimenting with industrial rave, while on the pounding 2021 comeback track 'ALYGATYR', the foursome indulge their fondness for surreal lyrics. "*Life in a simulator/Drip feed and straight to the incubator*," comes the vague observation on that mosh-starting track.

It's followed by a prog-tinged interlude in 'Space', which allows the record to breathe by introducing moments of contemplation.

Elsewhere, on 'The Wall', Pizzorno sings, "*Said a lot of things I know I will regret, but that's the point of getting old*."

Although the track tackles ageing and its inevitability, the reality is that the unfortunate context they found themselves in may have given them a new lease of life.

What looked like a bleak ending for one of the UK's most popular indie rock bands has resulted in a commendable comeback for its remaining members. **NICK REILLY**

British indie band moves into the big league

Sports Team

Gulp!

★★★★☆

EVERYTHING ABOUT Sports Team is tailored to their live show, which is why it was especially cruel when the six-piece had to release long-awaited debut album *Deep Down Happy* in the middle of lockdown. When it did finally reach live audiences, the band began to gain momentum, and they greet the world with follow-up *Gulp!* as one of the hottest new British indie bands. Sports Team have set their sights on becoming the biggest band on the planet, and this ambition is on full show across this album of intoxicating, large-scale melodies, all fronted by exuberant frontman, Alex Rice. Although they take their cues from Stateside indie rock staples Parquet Courts and Pavement, lyrically, they mine unfashionable British minutiae to make your youth spent in the local Slug & Lettuce feel romantic and important. Opener 'The Game' deserves to have a permanent place in indie discos of the future, while Sorry vocalist Asha Lorenz gives 'Cool It Kid' a creepy edge. Through the raucous 'R Entertainment', jangly 'Getting Better' and punky 'Fingers', there's plenty on show to ensure that Sports Team's remarkable rise won't stop here. **WILL RICHARDS**

KASABIAN: NEIL BEDFORD

Quick Hits

Six new albums you need to know about now

Maggie Rogers
Surrender
Polydor

RESISTANCE IS FUTILE On her second full length-album, Maggie Rogers swaps her glistening alt-pop for crunchy riffing, and it's a new aesthetic that suits her well. The soaring guitars that propel singles 'That's Where I Am' and desire-filled 'Want Want' serve her passionate songwriting perfectly, while highlight 'Shatter' is a 90s throwback.

★★★★☆

Hot Chip
Freakout/Release
Domino

LET IT GO Hot Chip's eighth album is their first created in their own studio, dubbed Relax & Enjoy. On *Freakout/Release*, they do just that, revelling in further independence and taking their pop-dance crossovers to looser, freer places. Lyrically, the album touches on the darkness of recent times, but it ends up as more of a release than a freakout.

★★★★☆

Phoebe Green
Lucky Me
Chess Club

FIRST TIME LUCKY On debut album *Lucky Me*, Manchester's Phoebe Green further hones the chameleonic pop that has made her one to watch in the past few years. Lyrics dig into privilege, impostor syndrome and mental health over bright, dazzling pop music, all tied together with bundles of exuberant personality from a future star.

★★★★☆

Paolo Nutini
Last Night in the Bittersweet
Atlantic Records

WORTH THE WAIT On his fourth album, Scotland's premier soul supremo delivers a record that justifies the eight-year wait. Tracks such as 'Through the Echoes' show off that incredible voice, while 'Lose It' offers an effective journey into spoken word. A triumphant return from one of Scotland's best.

★★★★☆

Working Men's Club
Fear Fear
Heavenly

CLUB TOGETHER Working Men's Club mastermind Syd Minsky-Sargeant has been hailed as a Mark E. Smith for a new generation, but on second album *Fear Fear*, he'd be more at home in the Haçienda. A record written during the pandemic but with future freedom at its heart, claustrophobia gives way to liberation via dark'n'dirty synth rock.

★★★½☆

Lauv
All 4 Nothing
Virgin

ANALYSE THIS Lauv's new album starts with some self-mythologising, speaking of "*a boy who broke his own heart*" and then "*made a couple songs and they got big*". Across *All 4 Nothing*, the pop star re-evaluates his behaviour during his early fame over deliciously catchy alt-pop, all the while carving a better path for the future.

★★★☆☆

CONTRIBUTOR: WILL RICHARDS

KELLY JEFFREY, LILLIE EIGER

WHATEVER NEXT

Jamie T
The Theory of Whatever
★★★★☆

"I DON'T THINK I'M necessarily very good at what I do and it takes me a long time to do shit well," said Jamie T in his Rolling Stone UK interview for this very issue (see page 25).

It's been six years since his last record, so you sense he might be onto something with that second point. The first, however, couldn't be further from the mark.

On *The Theory of Whatever*, the London artist demonstrates once again why he's become one of Britain's most beloved cult musicians. Tracks such as 'The Old Style Raiders' can be immediately filed as new Jamie T classics, with soaring choruses destined to be, like most of his songs, screamed back at him during his famously passionate live shows. But there is real depth, too. On 'Talk Is Cheap', he delivers perhaps the most powerful song of his career, a soul-baring ballad which hints at his own personal struggles. "*A bag of white / I fade black... I am rudderless*," comes his honest admission on the hard-hitting song.

Elsewhere, tracks such as 'Thank You' show off eclectic collaborators such as Matt Maltese – whose razor-sharp lyrics have earned him his own deserved comparisons to Jamie T.

All in all, it's a record which proves every bit worth the six-year wait. Here's hoping he won't leave it so long next time. **NICK REILLY**

ESSAY

Is Netflix Still Worth a Damn?

The streaming giant used to be a viewer's best friend. Now, it seems content to give us the finger

BY ALAN SEPINWALL

IF NETFLIX WASN'T the only streaming video service of the 2010s, it often felt as if it was. It had a remarkable library of classic TV shows that at one point included *The Office, Friends,* and *Lost,* to name a few. Beginning in 2013 with *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black,* and continuing through *Daredevil, Stranger Things,* and more, it had a wave of original series that viewers couldn't stop talking about. And its method of releasing every episode of a new season at once transformed the very way we all consumed and talked about television. While other streamers like Hulu and Amazon Prime Video struggled to keep up, Netflix just kept spending, apparently determined to destroy as much of the competition as possible while convincing viewers they would never need another source for TV and movies.

The plan worked — sort of. The volume of Netflix's output encouraged millions of consumers to cut the cable cord and stick with a handful of streamers, burning traditional broadcast ratings almost down to ash. But where Netflix should feel triumphant as the 10th anniversary of the *Cards* premiere approaches next year, instead it's playing defence. Sure, its subscriber base still vastly outnumbers any of its competitors, but it's a tech company whose business model is predicated on constant growth, and that growth of late has slowed to a crawl. In some markets, it's even gone down, which has sent the value of Netflix's stock plummeting. (The price dropped 35 per cent on one day alone in mid-April.) The service that once prided itself on providing a clean, ad-free alternative to traditional television is now planning a lower-priced, ad-supported subscription tier later this year to stop the bleeding.

How did a company that once wiped Blockbuster off the map with its maverick ingenuity become another potential business-school cautionary tale? It's the shows, stupid.

While Netflix had a huge head start on the competition, the rest of the industry was not blind to what was happening throughout the 2010s. Every other conglomerate quickly understood both that streaming was the future and that they had to beef up their own digital platforms right away. As Netflix's library deals lapsed, those titles went back home: *Friends* to HBO Max, *The Office* to Peacock, and so on.

And if Netflix's competitors couldn't compete in quantity of original programming, they could in quality. Netflix has made a few masterpieces over the past decade — see our list, opposite — but for the most part, its executives seemed to aim for shows that were just good enough. The suits trusted that the superior calibre of their user interface, the power of their recommendation algorithm, and a heavy emphasis on serialisation and cliffhangers would make people want to keep watching more and more Netflix, no matter what.

But that approach has proved to be unsustainable now that customers have so many other options. Netflix finally won a couple of major Emmys last year, for *The Crown* and *The Queen's Gambit,* and still manages the odd breakout hit, like *Bridgerton* or *Squid Game*. More

ILLUSTRATION BY **Matt Harrison Clough**

often than not, though, the shows people are talking about these days come from non-Netflix sources, like *The Mandalorian* on Disney+, *Ted Lasso* on Apple TV+, or *The Flight Attendant* on HBO Max.

Not coincidentally, all of those shows are either released on a traditional one-episode-per-week schedule or some kind of hybrid model that's still well short of Netflix's binge-release approach. Where binges once felt exciting, there's now so much television that it can feel like homework to have an entire season dumped on you on a Friday. The binge model has also encouraged the worst instincts in many Netflix creators, who too often refer to their shows as "a 10-hour movie". This is meant to sound prestigious, but it mostly turns a season into an amorphous bag of plot with an inescapable sense that things have been dragging on for much too long.

Netflix's early image was as a friend to the viewer, rescuing shows cancelled by other networks. It seemed to have an unspoken agreement with audiences that series would be allowed to run as long as creators wanted – or, at least, that creators would be given ample warning if they had to write a finale. Those days are long gone. Now, the Netflix algorithm has determined that all but the most popular shows are better off ending within two to three seasons, because viewers would rather have constantly new viewing options than keep watching their favourites for years on end. And in many cases, shows like the charming women's pro-wrestling dramedy *GLOW* have been abruptly cancelled without any kind of storytelling closure for their audiences.

A big part of the problem is that so many Netflix originals lately seem to have been developed solely to satisfy the "if you liked that, you'll enjoy this" aspect of the algorithm, and come across as pale imitations of the real thing. *Ozark* clearly scratched an itch for viewers who missed *Breaking Bad*, *Justified*, and the like, but even its fans seemed more excited for the *type* of show it was than for *Ozark* itself.

All along, there's been a complacent and at times arrogant attitude at Netflix that its way is the only way; its algorithm is smarter than the most astute TV veterans, and anyone suggesting otherwise is just living in the past. That same posture has been palpable in recent Netflix PR disasters like its steadfast defence of Dave Chappelle's anti-trans rhetoric in his Netflix specials, and in the company's aggressive but so far largely unsuccessful pursuit of Academy Awards for its movie division.

For all the talk over the years by Netflix execs about the ways they are transforming the television industry, the core idea remains the same as it was in the days of *I Love Lucy*: make shows that people really want to watch. With its tentacles reaching in so many directions, Netflix hasn't been doing enough of that for quite a while. Whether it can find its way back to the future remains to be seen.

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): SAM TAYLOR/NETFLIX; BETH DUBBER/NETFLIX; PHOTO BY NETFLIX © 2016 NETFLIX; NETFLIX; STEVE DIETL/NETFLIX; KAILEY SCHWERMAN/NETFLIX

SEXPERTS Mackey and Butterfield share carnal knowledge

THE BEST OF NETFLIX

When the streamer's shows are good, they're very good

20. Sex Education 2019-PRESENT

YA has been a fruitful category for Netflix, particularly this rollicking Britcom. Shy teenager Otis (Asa Butterfield) has been miserable growing up with a single mum who's an outspoken sex therapist (Gillian Anderson). But when the kids at his school start having relationship difficulties, Otis, his queer best friend Eric (Ncuti Gatwa, in a star-making performance), and Otis's crush Maeve (Emma Mackey) start up a bootleg sex clinic to help their classmates get satisfaction. A comedy as sweet as it is silly, it explores a wide range of sexual and romantic relationships.

19. The Haunting of Hill House 2018

Horror filmmaker Mike Flanagan has graced Netflix with an unofficial franchise featuring many of the same actors (see also *The Haunting of Bly Manor* and *Midnight Mass*), starting with this crackling adaptation of the Shirley Jackson novel about a family that can't escape the history of the haunted house where they lived (and some of them died). Even at a time when it feels obligatory for a prestige drama to do long, continuous shots, the *Hill House* episode presented that way was a marvel.

18. The Baby-Sitters Club

2020-2021

Though adaptations of famous IP are all the rage right now, Netflix somehow couldn't find a big enough audience for this warmhearted take on Ann M. Martin's beloved book series about a group of middle-school girls who start up their own babysitting business. But those who did watch found a lot to cherish in the ways the show modernised aspects of the novels — in one episode, the shy Mary Anne (Malia Baker) stands up to ER doctors who keep misgendering her latest charge — while staying true to their coming-of-age heart.

17. Stranger Things

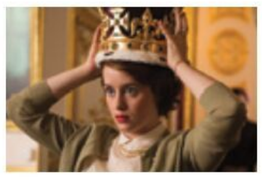
2016-Present

Like Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* sent the movie business on a never-ending hunt for blockbusters, the success of *Stranger Things* — itself an homage to the 80s works of Spielberg and Stephen King — transformed Netflix from a company happy with boutique hits and critical acclaim into one that wanted its shows to attract huge audiences. If the series has begun to feel bloated in its later seasons (and if the kids look old enough to run for Congress), it's still terrific popcorn entertainment that's made at least one great new star in Millie Bobby Brown as the telekinetic Eleven.

16. Lady Dynamite

2016-2017

In its earlier years, Netflix built a large stable of shows whose individual audiences may not have been huge, but were designed to be some viewers' all-time favourites. Perhaps no series symbolised this creative ethos more than *Lady Dynamite*. Inspired by star Maria Bamford's struggles with bipolar disorder, it was weird, sad and surreal as it bounced through multiple eras of her life, including the future.



15. The Crown

2016-PRESENT

The "10-hour movie" storytelling model has been bad for most Netflix dramas. One exception: Peter Morgan's old-school (in every sense) docudrama about Queen Elizabeth (played so far by Claire Foy and Olivia Colman, with Imelda Staunton set for the final seasons).

The show wisely goes with a traditional crisis-of-the-week format, so that each episode has its own conflicts, even as they feed into fascinating larger questions about how the royals have to sublimate their own desires in service to an ideal they were born into.

14. Dear White People

2017-2021

Not every movie lends itself well to being adapted for television. The translations that work tend to involve ideas where there was more to say than could fit into a feature-length film. Case in point: Justin Simien's expansion of his sharp 2014 film about Black students at a predominantly white Ivy League school. The show had four seasons' worth of room to explore the perspectives of what felt like everyone on campus, and to do bold experiments like turning much of the final season into a musical.

13. Squid Game

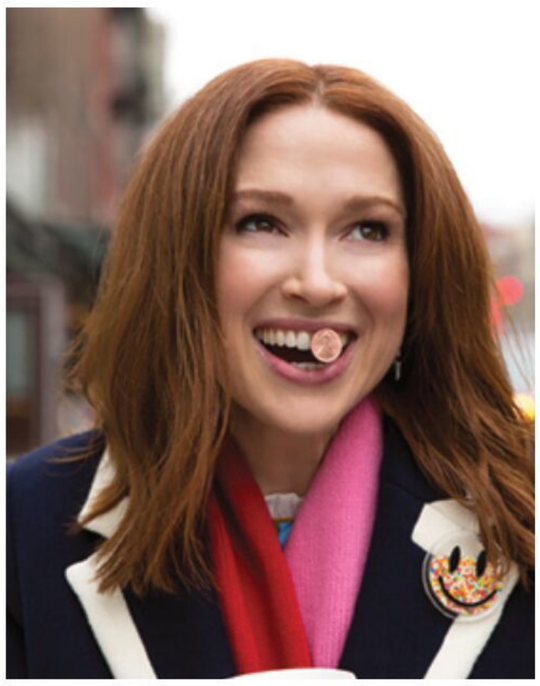
2021-PRESENT

Netflix has been way out ahead in terms of acquiring or developing programming for its international markets (*Elite*, *Money Heist*, *Lupin*). The best of these series is *Squid Game*, a riveting dystopian thriller out of Korea about financially desperate people who agree to compete in a deadly, winner-takes-all competition inspired by playground games like Red Light, Green Light. A triumph of both social satire and production design, it became a rare word-of-mouth phenomenon.

12. When They See Us

2019

It was an infamous story made even more harrowing when it became clear the cops and the media had got it so wrong: a woman was brutally raped in Central Park, New York, and five young men of colour were convicted, only to be exonerated years later, when the real attacker confessed. Ava DuVernay's dramatisation of the story packs a wallop throughout, but especially in the sequences depicting what Korey Wise (Emmy winner Jharrel Jerome) endured as the only member of the Central Park Five sentenced as an adult.



DREAM STREAM (From top): Laughs aplenty in Tina Fey's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*; rough justice in *When They See Us*; *I Think You Should Leave with Tim Robinson*'s unforgettable hot-dog sketch; *Squid Game* provided addictive viewing

11. Mindhunter

2017-2019

David Fincher executive-produced *House of Cards*, but his best contribution to Netflix was his return to the serial-killer territory of *Se7en* and *Zodiac*. This time, he approached the genre from a different direction, with a drama about the FBI agents (played by Jonathan Groff and Holt McCallany) and psychiatrist (Anna Torv) who created the science of criminal profiling. The bulk of the show is just the agents talking with incarcerated monsters — making *Mindhunter* the odd thriller that's all talk and little action, and much more interesting for it.

10. Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt

2015-2019

We have to blur the lines to call *Kimmy* a Netflix original, since the first season was produced to air on NBC, before network executives there panicked that the show — about a young woman (Ellie Kemper) rescued from years trapped in a doomsday cult's underground bunker — would be too weird or sad to work for them. But Tina Fey and Robert Carlock's creation had a healthy and frequently hilarious four-season run when it surely would have died within a few weeks on NBC. A win-win.

9. One Day at a Time

2017-2019

Even beyond *Kimmy Schmidt*, Netflix built an early reputation as a viewer-friendly place by rescuing cancelled shows from broadcast and cable networks. Eventually, the roles reversed, and we had a situation where this smart, funny, and poignant Norman Lear revival — starring Justina Machado as a Cuban American single mum raising teen kids with the help of her mother, Lydia (Rita Moreno), and dealing with hot-button issues like immigration, sexuality, and PTSD — was cancelled by Netflix and then revived for a fourth season by cable channel Pop.

8. Unbelievable 2019

Netflix and actress Merritt Wever have been a strong team over the years. She won an Emmy for her gun-slinging role in 2017's *Godless*, stole scenes in *Marriage Story*, and was phenomenal here as an empathetic cop (alongside Toni Collette) on the trail of a serial rapist. TV is inundated with mediocre true-crime dramatisations,

THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): LARA SOLANKI/NETFLIX; ERIC LIEBOWITZ/NETFLIX; PATRICK HARBRON/NETFLIX; MIKE YARISH/NETFLIX; NOH JUHAN/NETFLIX; ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/NETFLIX; OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): K.C. BAILEY/NETFLIX; NETFLIX; JOJO WHILDEN/NETFLIX; NETFLIX; TYLER GOLDEN/NETFLIX

but *Unbelievable* — which featured a fantastic Kaitlyn Dever as a victim of the rapist who was somehow charged with lying to police about it — is one great enough to live up to its title.

7. Master of None

2015-PRESENT

Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* was among the best of the wave of auteur-driven TV in the 2010s. He wrote, directed, and starred in the show's ambitious and lovely early seasons, which mixed stories of his alter ego, Dev, who was looking for love, with tales of the people in Dev's life: his immigrant father's journey to America, his friend Denise (Lena Waithe) gradually coming out to her family, even a digression about New York cabbies. After a long break, it returned last year with a *Scenes From a Marriage*-inspired story about Denise, which was less interesting, even as it suggested that Ansari and Waithe had not run out of ambition.

6. I Think You Should Leave With Tim Robinson 2019-PRESENT

Each season of Tim Robinson's sketch-comedy delight is six episodes of less than 20 minutes apiece. Yet within that efficient packaging exist indelible, explosive comedy sketches, many of them about people who take some dumb belief and refuse to let go of it until everyone around them is deeply uncomfortable. Bonus points for the hot-dog car sketch ("We're all trying to find the guy who did this!") becoming the single most useful meme of the past four years.

5. Big Mouth

2017-PRESENT

An animated show about middle schoolers that probably shouldn't be watched by middle schoolers, *Big Mouth* focuses on the rampaging horniness of characters like Nick (co-creator Nick Kroll), Andrew (John Mulaney), Jessi (Jessi Klein), and the pillow-molesting Jay (Jason Mantzoukas). And that's even before we get to all the filthy fantasies put into the kids' heads by hormone monsters like Connie (Maya Rudolph). Yet for as graphic as the series gets, it has a fundamental empathy for kids going through one of the most uncomfortable stages of life.

4. American Vandal

2017-2018

Speaking of scatological adolescent ridiculousness, consider this note-perfect spoof of true-crime podcasts and docuseries in which a pair of high-school filmmakers investigate two mysteries: who defaced 27 cars in the faculty parking lot with drawings of penises, and who contaminated the cafeteria lemonade to make their classmates lose control of their bowels? As satire alone, it was wonderful. But beneath all the dick and poop jokes was an insightful and poignant look at the kids caught up in all this gross-out behaviour.

RUSSIAN DOLL History repeating

3. Russian Doll

2019-PRESENT

We're finally entering the realm of Capital-G Greatness. Natasha Lyonne graduated from the next show on this list to her own co-creation: a high-concept series that bent genre as easily as it bent the laws of physics. In the flawless first season, Lyonne's irrepressible Nadia was cursed to die and be reborn over and over again on her 36th birthday. In the messier but still delightful second season, she began quantum leaping into the young lives of her mother and grandmother. *Russian Doll* is brimming with ideas and energy in a way few recent series (on Netflix or otherwise) can equal.

REIN MAN BoJack tries to get control

2. Orange Is the New Black 2013-2019

House of Cards was the kind of middle-aged-male antihero drama that television had seen plenty of before. *Orange*, a dramedy set at a women's prison with an enormous cast crossing boundaries of race, sexuality, gender, and more, felt brand-new, and like a sign that the streaming era would have lots of room for TV to keep evolving. That's not quite what happened, and *Orange* was more creatively uneven than many shows on this list. But its best moments were remarkable and symbolise a road the streamer hasn't taken nearly as often as it could.

BIG MOUTH Puberty and its horrors

1. BoJack Horseman

2014-2020

Yes, the one indisputable Netflix masterpiece is an animated dramedy about a depressed horse (Will Arnett) who once starred in a bad 90s family sitcom and now contents himself with abusing both drugs and the trust of anyone who cares about him. *BoJack* was a parody of modern dramas about middle-aged male antiheroes who get away with everything. But it was also a supreme example of the form, as laugh-out-loud ridiculous and as soul-crushingly sad a show as has been produced during the streaming era. ®

Surf's up as women prepare to catch a wave

Film

WIPING OUT SEXISM ON THE WAVES

Female surfers reflect on their decades-long battle to be taken seriously and to achieve equal pay

Girls Can't Surf

STARRING	Jolene Smith, Jorja Smith
DIRECTED BY	Christopher Nelius

★★★★☆

IRONIC title alert! Obviously, girls *can* surf, but that wasn't a popular opinion back in the 80s, when the women in this Australian documentary were riding the first waves of a feminist movement.

The key interviewees are Jolene and Jorja Smith, twin surfers from California who are interviewed together and share a great sense of humour. They're joined by fellow Americans Frieda Zamba and Lisa Andersen, Australians Pam Burridge, Pauline Menczer, Jodie Cooper and Layne Beachley and South African Wendy Botha.

They talk frankly about their early days on the surf scene, recalling the way they were treated by male surfers, surf fans, the media and potential sponsors. This is a time when female riders were considered a novelty at best, a nuisance or a threat at worst, and when bikini contests took place alongside surf competitions as a matter of routine. Infuriating recollections range from comedic insults to anger-inducing exploitation.

But don't worry, this isn't a moan fest — it's a spirited, funny doc with straight-talking women taking a wry look back at an attitude that's hopefully been consigned to the past.

They're mostly interviewed separately, and it's interesting to see them talk about each other, often recalling their first impressions of one another (everyone is very amusing on the subject of Frieda). A number also talk about coming to terms with their sexuality in a homophobic culture.

There are plenty of uplifting moments as they recall winning contests, finally attracting the occasional potential sponsor, and being besieged by young girls who wanted to emulate their success.

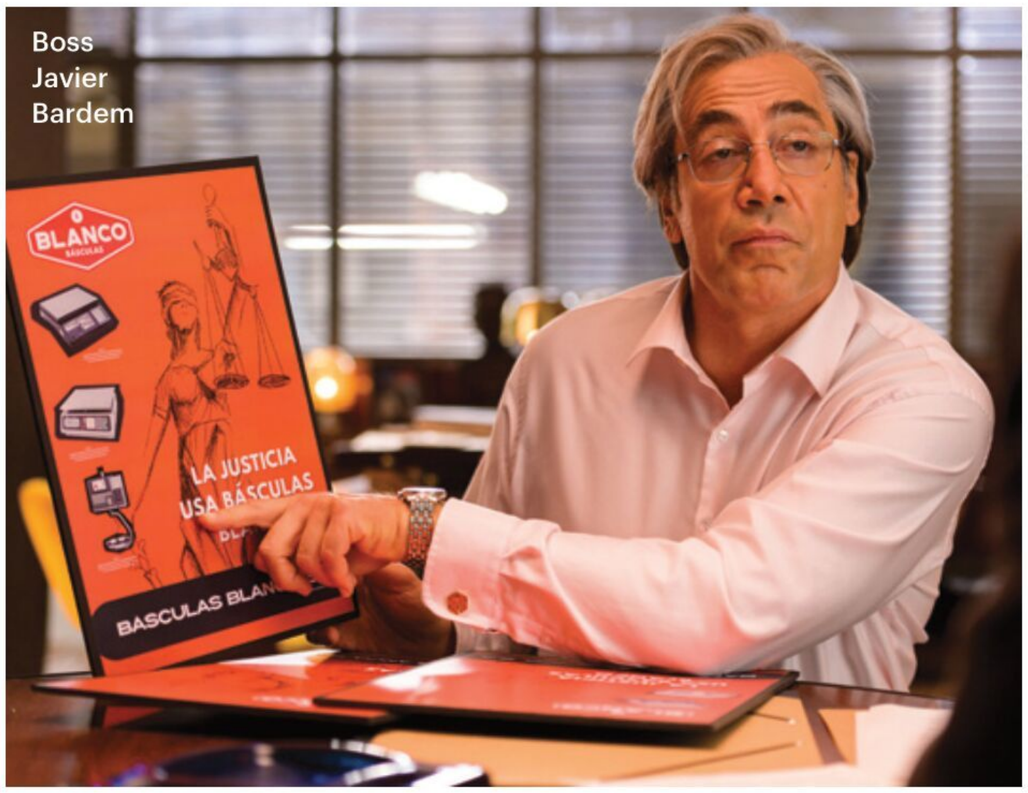
Although this is a solo sport in which solidarity didn't always come naturally, it transpires that these women still played a large part in achieving parity in competitive surfing circles; at least when it came to prize money. A few years ago, after a furore on social media, the gender pay gap was finally corrected in pro surfing. This win brought these pioneering women to tears: it may be too late for them, but not for the young women of the present and the future.

If you're looking for detailed insight into the sport of surfing, or a complex look at the history of surfing, this isn't the place to come, although it provides a good overview, and there's entertaining archive footage of contests and crowds. Instead, this is more about the personalities, the power of sisterhood and the suitably casual industrial action they 'sort of' organised on the beaches.

Importantly, the film includes several supportive male voices from the world of surfing who are happy to share their recollections of the changing scene. But the real stars are female, and it's refreshing to hear from lots of contented women over the age of 50 who appear to have aged naturally, making you realise how rare that is to see on the big screen.

Given the recent strides it has made, it seems like the sport of surfing might actually be ahead of Hollywood. *Women Can't Age* is another movie altogether. *19 AUG* **ANNA SMITH**

THE GOOD BOSS: FERNANDO MARRERO/THE MEDIAPRO STUDIO; *HIT THE ROAD*: KINO LORBER



Boss Javier Bardem

WEIGHING UP THE ODDS

The Good Boss

STARRING
Javier Bardem

DIRECTED BY
Fernando León de Aranoa

★★★☆☆

HERE'S ANOTHER, VERY DIFFERENT FILM with a title that becomes increasingly ironic. This time, it's a factory boss who reveals his unscrupulous behaviour while preparing for an inspection. Javier Bardem stars as a Spanish David Brent in a film that swept the board at the Goya Awards. It's a gently amusing satire that uses the workplace as a microcosm of the wider political scene.

Bardem is Blanco, the boss who treats his employees like family — unless he wants to fire them, or have sex with them. There's a lot of both going around as Blanco tries to get his scales factory into shape before a committee decides on an award for excellence. It soon becomes clear that Blanco excels at manipulating people, whether it's the new intern or his best friend. There are moments of fist-chewing awkwardness as he attempts to clear the shop floor of any potential problems, including a disgruntled employee who forms a protest camp outside.

Ironically, amid much symbolic talk involving the scales the factory produces, the film's balance between dark and light doesn't feel deeply satisfying. This neither gives in to its farcical urges nor digs too deep into its political messaging. But Bardem's enjoyable performance tips the scales in the right direction. *15 JULY* **ANNA SMITH**

EAT YOUR HEART OUT

The Feast

STARRING
Nia Roberts, Annes Elwy, Julian Lewis Jones

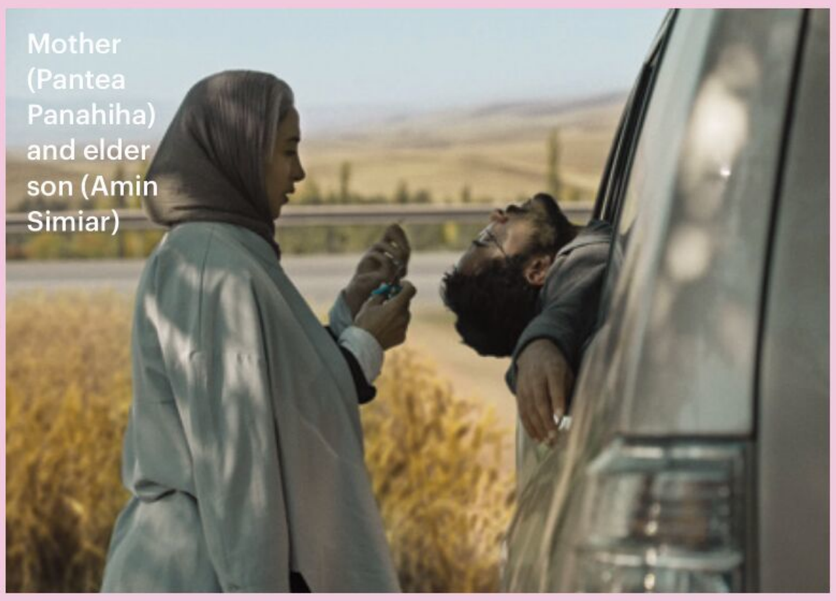
DIRECTED BY
Lee Haven Jones

★★★★☆

FANCY DINNER AND A MOVIE? There's plenty to digest in this tangy Welsh language horror. A crisp, stylish slow-burner, it follows a night in the life of a wealthy family hosting a dinner party in their modern home in the countryside. Glenda (Nia Roberts) is so distracted with planning a feast to impress her important guests, she barely notices that there's something decidedly odd about the new waitress she's hired, Cadi (Annes Elwy). Earthy Cadi glides around, silently interacting with each member of the family, from the eccentric grown sons to the politician father. Most interesting is her engagement with matriarch Glenda, who gradually reveals more about the family fortune with her anxious chatter. As the dishes pile up, so does the symbolism, the mystery and the gore.

Lee Haven Jones has done terrific work on TV shows including *Doctor Who*, and announces himself as a strong genre film director, working with a tight script from Roger Williams. What starts as an intriguing, darkly funny character-driven thriller turns into a full-on horror with a memorable message involving the food we eat and the ground it comes from. You'll find you have plenty to discuss over dessert – if you can stomach it, that is. *19 AUG* **ANNA SMITH**

Nia Roberts plays host Glenda


Mother (Pantea Panahiha) and elder son (Amin Simiar)

TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

Hit the Road

STARRING
Hassan Madjooni, Pantea Panahiha, Rayan Sarlak

DIRECTED BY
Panah Panahi

★★★★☆

THIS CANNES FILM FESTIVAL HIT also nabbed the top prize at the London Film Festival, and it's finally on general release. A charming road trip movie with a serious political undercurrent, it sees a likeable couple (Pantea Panahiha and Hassan Madjooni) driving into a remote area of Iran with their grown-up son and his much younger brother. Rayan Sarlak is a stand-out as the latter, a hilarious, precocious kid who natters away and distracts the adults from the weighty matters that are clearly hard to shake from their minds. As they keep the true nature of the trip from him, we have to deduce it from gradual revelations, giving the film a poignant twist while reminding us of the beauty in kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice and family love. If you're a sucker for father-son movies, then this one is for you. *29 JULY* **ANNA SMITH**

RS ROAD TEST

Range Rover Autobiography

A new generation Range Rover doesn't come along very often: the just-arrived class of 2022 is only the fifth iteration since 1970. Baby elephants are more frequent. But it's worth the wait...

Tina Turner, for sure. Sir Elton John, certainly. Sir Paul McCartney, without a doubt. Queen Bey, Lady Gaga, Madonna, but of course. Icons, all of them. And here, believe it or believe it not, is another — the all-new Range Rover.

I know, it's a linked intro worthy of a veteran Radio 1 DJ, but along with the Model T Ford — the world's first-ever mass-produced car — and the Volkswagen Beetle, the Range Rover can lay unchallenged claim to automotive icon status.

The first-ever luxury Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV), the Range Rover has been frequently imitated but never bettered in the decades since its launch in 1970. It is both upper class and yet classless, as comfortable kerbside in Chelsea as it is crossing the kind of terrain you'd struggle to walk on. It climbs and wades, but still turns heads at Daylesford, the Cotswolds' favoured food-hall-meets-farm shop (adorable, though now I have no money but some especially fine cheese).

It is, for the avoidance of doubt, a Swiss Army knife on wheels — and notwithstanding the unknown qualities of the fighting force of a neutral nation — I can vouch for the practicalities of having both a penknife and a corkscrew on one's person at all times. And of being able to get to Waitrose on a snow day.

2022's Range Rover is, from the outside in, as crisp, clean and fuss-free as a pebble worn smooth by countless tides — a familiar silhouette honed in the wind tunnel and shorn of trivial adornment.

The rear end's lighting, in particular, is so minimal as to be absent until illuminated, at which point, it's concept-car space-age and breathtakingly elegant.

From the inside out, it's the best drawing room outside of the National Trust's finest. You sit white-van-man high, peer imperiously from within a glasshouse to shame the Eden Project and are enshrined by soft, sumptuous hides on every surface. Rolls-Royce, Bentley or Aston Martin might equal such a finish, but that's the extent of where this bar is now set.

QUICK STATS

POWER
350BHP
TORQUE
516LB/FT
0-60MPH
5.8 SECS
TOP SPEED
145MPH
CO_2
208G/KM
PRICE (AS TESTED)
£123,715

Her Majesty's Press are offered, for a launch driving day, a D350 model that — predictably enough — denotes a diesel-fired powerplant with 350 horsepower, and that provides means enough to deliver swift and often nigh silent progress for all the car's scale and heft. Were the combustion engine not facing obsolescence, we'd be lauding this powertrain's evolution for its refinement and fuel consumption. As it is, the incoming P400e (petrol, 400bhp, hybrid, with CO_2 emissions as low as 18g/km) might be the surf-and-turf choice until all-electric lands in 2024.

On the road, progress is every bit as imperious as you might imagine — that commanding driving position, a vast cabin and terrific rolling refinement combining to squash out most evidence of an imperfect outside world. The Range Rover may not appear a limousine in name, but it surely is in nature.

Which is why, perhaps, its maker encouraged us to gather our cars at Eastnor Castle, home to Land Rover's proving ground since God was a boy. Here, generations of what they call "the best 4x4 by far" have been tested to destruction in order that — no matter the extent of 21st-century gentrification, Amazon Alexa installation and all — what remains beneath can take you places nothing else can.

Whether you or I, having dropped more than £100k on a new, full-fat Range Rover, would drive it off a cliff, through deep-set gullies strewn with rocks the size of bungalows or wade through water up to the door handles is a moot point. But the fact is, I know having now done it that you could if you wanted to. And that's beyond impressive, especially to someone who — as a kid — treasured his Tonka Toys for much the same reason.

Icon? You better believe it. Of its kind, it's simply the best.

DARREN STYLES

LANDROVER.CO.UK

TECH

SMART SOLUTIONS FOR MODERN LIVING

WORDS AND EDIT
DECLAN MCGLYNN

RAY REVOLUTION

Sonos are back with their most affordable soundbar yet

High-end audio brand and speaker manufacturer Sonos have launched a compact soundbar called Ray that's tuned for music as well as the latest Marvel production. To fit so many audio innovations inside such a small frame, they've introduced new acoustic technology that spreads sound around the room as well as a centre speaker that directs all-important dialogue and other crucial audio straight at the listener.

The result is an impressively powerful soundbar for the size and price – at £279, it's their most affordable yet. It's worth noting, however, that as Sonos has opted for optical audio only, there's no HDMI so there's no Dolby Atmos on the Ray.

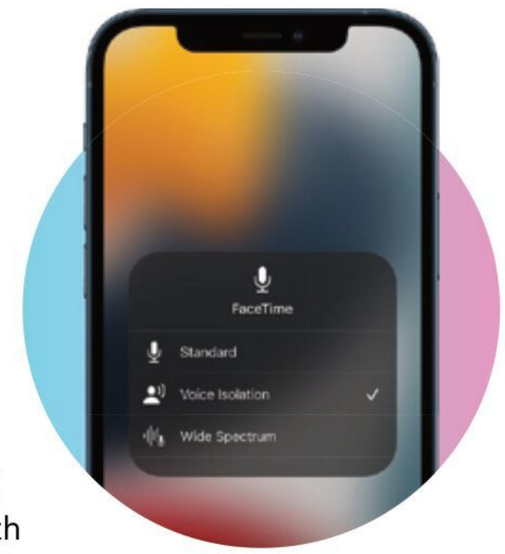
One of its appealing features is a voice-control function, which uses the dulcet tones of *Breaking Bad* and *Mandalorian* star Giancarlo Esposito. Aside from regular commands including play, stop, next, and so on, you can also change the room the music is playing in, ask for a specific playlist, or find out how much battery is left on a portable device. For those with privacy concerns, unlike with Alexa and Siri, no data is sent to the Cloud and all processing happens on the device.

Meanwhile, if you're in the market for a new speaker, the brand have introduced a fresh range of colours for their Roam portable model, £179. Choose from Olive, Wave or Sunset.

SONOS.COM

VIBRANT VOCALS

Hidden iOS setting enhances your voice on calls



Having recently gone viral on Twitter, Apple's Voice Isolation feature does a great job of blocking out any external audio so that all the other caller hears is your voice. It doesn't work in every app, but if you find yourself often working in noisy environments or taking calls on the go and are passive-aggressively muted on the reg, it's worth using it for the sake of everyone in your Zoom meeting. Tucked away in the iOS settings, it isn't automatically turned on. To activate it while on a call, go to your Control Centre, swipe down, then press and hold the Mic icon in the top-right corner and select 'Voice Isolation'. You can thank us later.

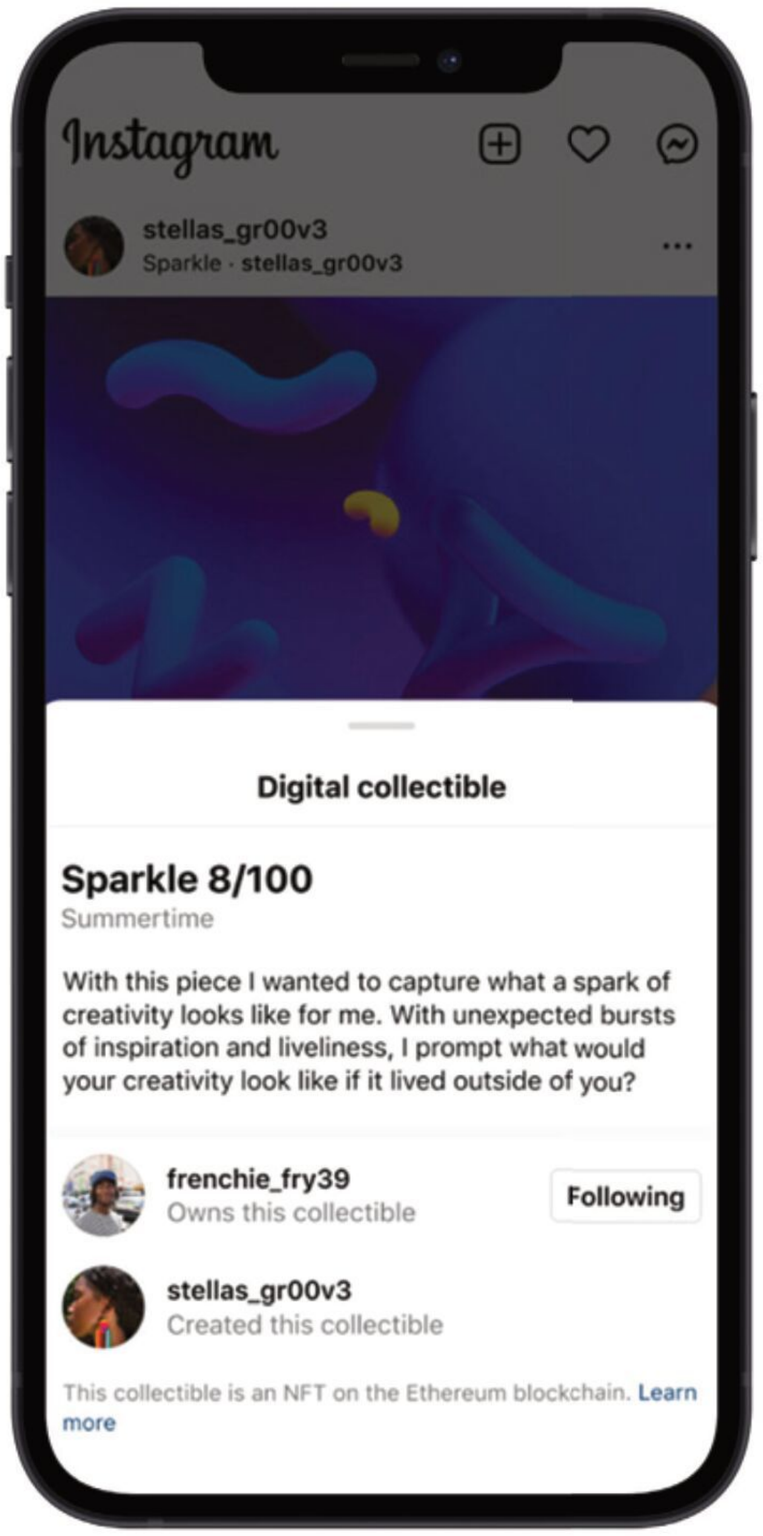
APPLE.COM

CUSTOM SOUND

Easy listening with Nocs

Stylish personal audio connoisseurs Nocs have launched a new set of in-ear headphones. With the NS-1100 AIR buds, you can enjoy ultra-personal audio thanks to a customised sound profile that's created via an app that tests your hearing. The buds also feature noise-cancelling and can be used for up to nine hours on a single charge, with an extra 21 hours of backup power in the carry case. They're a good price, too, at £104.

NOCS.SE



NFTS GO MAINSTREAM

Instagram and Spotify join NFT hype

Like them or loathe them, those three little letters have been inescapable since they went mainstream in late 2020. Now, NFTs — digital collectables that can be verified on the blockchain — are being added to both Instagram and Spotify, hinting that they're not just a passing fad. Instagram will let users add their crypto wallet to their account to display their cherished JPEGs, while Spotify is allowing artists to link to their NFT sales directly from their profile page within the streaming app. Whether you're crypto-curious, critical or non-committed, it seems NFTs are here to stay.

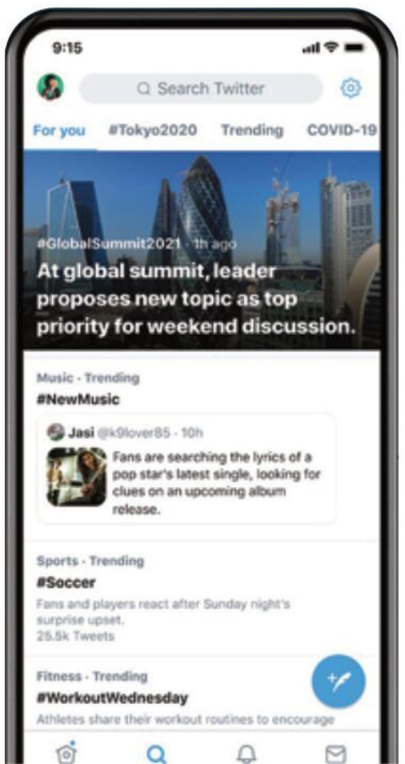
INSTAGRAM.COM

TWITTER TROUBLE

The app have been fined $150m

Twitter have been fined $150m (£119m) by the Federal Trade Commission in the US for failing to protect the privacy of users. The app failed to disclose that they were using phone numbers for targeted ads, despite claiming to be collecting the user data for account security purposes. The practice affected more than 140 million Twitter users. It's unclear how or if this will affect Elon Musk's highly publicised attempt to purchase the company for $44 billion.

TWITTER.COM



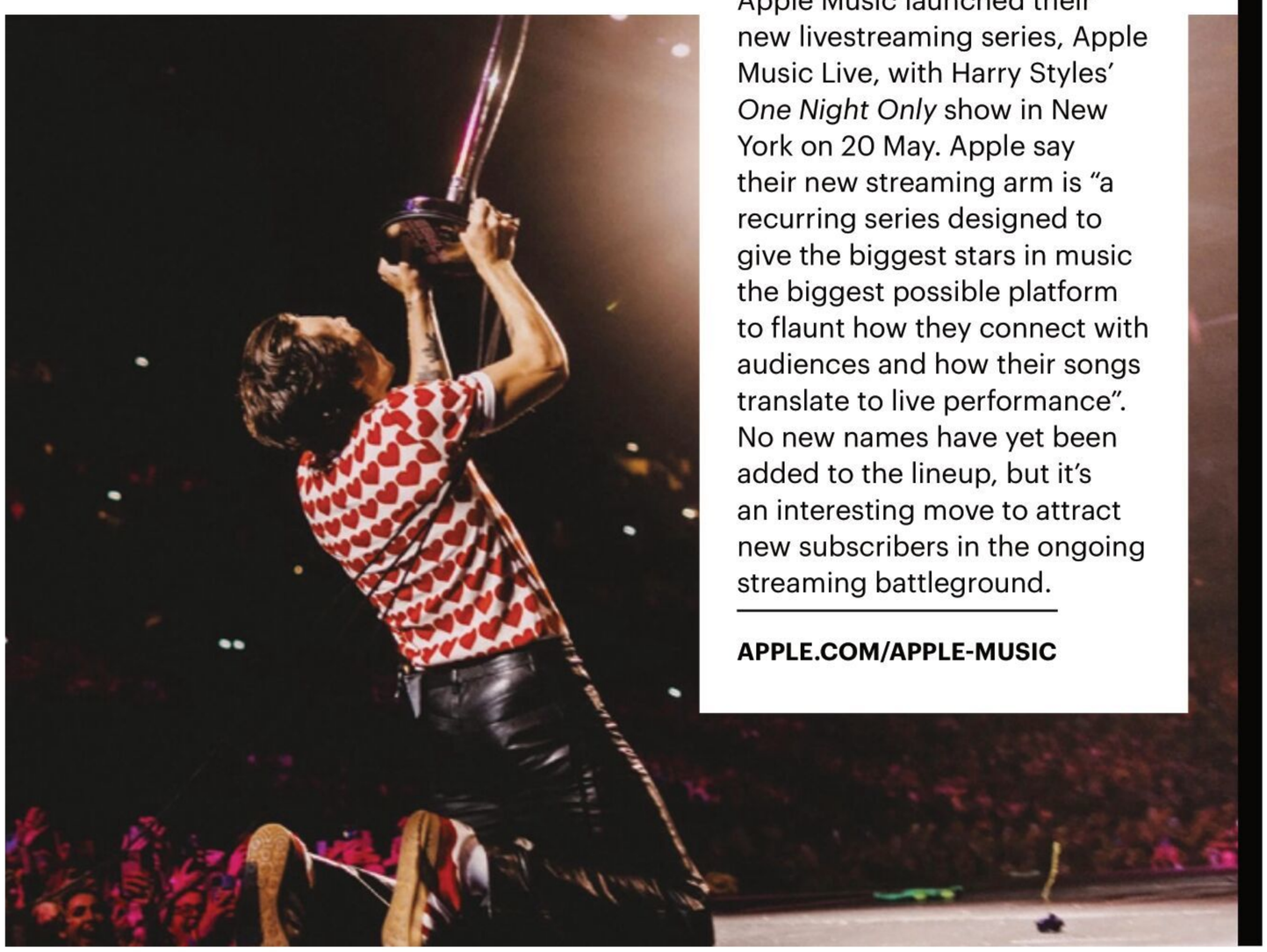
COURTESY OF APPLE MUSIC

APPLE GOES LIVE

Apple Music will stream a series of concerts this summer

Apple Music launched their new livestreaming series, Apple Music Live, with Harry Styles' *One Night Only* show in New York on 20 May. Apple say their new streaming arm is "a recurring series designed to give the biggest stars in music the biggest possible platform to flaunt how they connect with audiences and how their songs translate to live performance". No new names have yet been added to the lineup, but it's an interesting move to attract new subscribers in the ongoing streaming battleground.

APPLE.COM/APPLE-MUSIC



STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

WORDS AND EDIT
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Beach days

CDLP's latest swim collection continues their Lensed By series, with their sixth guest artist, Buenos Aires-born photographer Fausto Elizalde, shooting the range on a Spanish beach. The line features CDLP's staple colours teamed with flashes of jewel tones including blue, jade, fuchsia, violet and mint. Not only are the pieces crafted from Econyl, a fibre generated from ocean waste, but they come in a bag made from leftover fabrics for swimwear that's both eco-conscious and stylish. *cdlp.com*

French dressing

Parisian brand Lemaire have collaborated with luxury online retailer Mytheresa to create an exclusive men's collection. Focusing on high-quality essentials for everyday wear, the 14-piece capsule includes a military jacket with matching trousers, a twisted shirt and lambswool sweaters, all in autumnal hues. Among the accessories, a soft, nylon and canvas game bag and croissant styles are highlights. *mytheresa.com*

Cut loose

New brand Delos have created their men's and women's collections with the global traveller in mind. Focusing on both traditional and artisanal craft, they feature plenty of gorgeous details, including custom-made embroidery, Shibori tie-dye, ombre dye and quilting. The clothing has a chic simplicity to it, with billowing fabrics, looser fits and subtle patterns that make for a beautiful, cohesive wardrobe tailormade for watching a golden summer sunset on the sands.
Available at delos.land and MATCHESFASHION.COM

In the frame

British brands Ted Baker and eyewear label Oliver Goldsmith have got together to create a range of limited-edition sunglasses replicating Goldsmith's classic designs. Worn by the likes of Jackie O, these styles have stood the test of time, but this collection — with Ted Baker prints adorning the inner frames — brings them right up to date.
Available at Ted Baker's flagship Regent Street store and online at tedbaker.com

Smash hit

While Djokovic, Nadal, Alcaraz and other tennis superstars were delivering sizzling action at this summer's Giorgio Armani Tennis Classic, the label was drawing admiring glances for the 16-piece capsule collection it designed specially for the event's officials, ushers, ball boys and girls. Now you can look just as sharp in the limited-edition range: find it at Armani's Sloane Street store, Harrods and The Hurlingham Club.
armani.com

ARMANI IMAGE BY MARK KEAN AND STEPHANIE WAKNINE

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

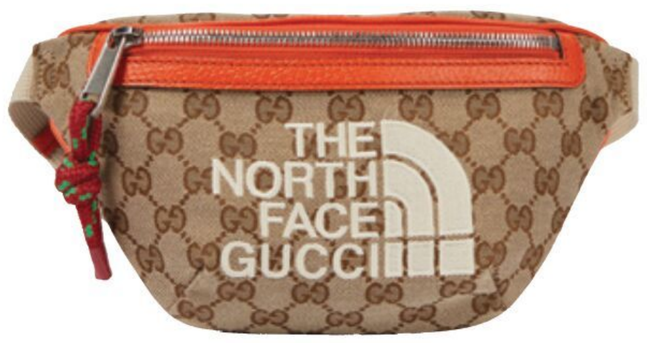
True colours

INNOVATIVE DESIGNS and updates and a summery palette are the order of the day for Louis Vuitton's latest accessories range. The classic brand have refreshed their ever-popular Taurillon Monogram and Monogram Macassar leather lines (pictured) with sunny sherbet accents in orange, purple and mint green in tribute to their late creative director Virgil Abloh. Cult favourites the Christopher backpack and Keepall 25 now come in two new sizes, while briefcases, wearable wallets (large enough for two smartphones), and the S-lock closure inspired by Louis Vuitton's original, unbreakable trunk lock have also been reinvigorated with the seasonal shades.
louisvuitton.com

FAVOURITE THINGS

Puzzle mini leather cross-body bag, £1,250,
by Loewe at MATCHESFASHION

Explorer logo-applique backpack, £775,
by Balenciaga at MATCHESFASHION



Belt bag, €850,
by The North Face x Gucci at Mytheresa

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Christine McVie

The songwriter on navigating the 'storm' of Fleetwood Mac

You're releasing a new collection of your solo recordings, but you've made only three solo albums during the past 50 years. Why is that?
Well, I've never felt I was a solo artist, particularly. I've always liked to be part of a group.... I also felt very uneasy about doing a solo tour for the material. And with this new compilation, I just went for favourite songs of mine and had them redone with extra instrumentation.

What music still moves you the most?
I'm a big fan of Steely Dan; The Beach Boys; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. I like quite a broad range of people, and my favourite ... the Beatles, of course. Some of their songs move me to tears.

How do you relax these days?
I watch a lot of TV. Really, that's about it. I don't really write songs to relax. When I feel a bit of pressure coming on, I'll get to the piano and see what I can come up with.

What's the best advice you ever received?
Not to lie. To be honest. That came from my parents. I can't imagine better advice coming from one's parents. I try to stick by that rule and to be as good a person as I can.

What's the worst part of success?
Being noticed if you don't want to be noticed. I'm not one of these people that's an extrovert.... But one shouldn't mind, because after all, they're paying you a terrific compliment.

If you could travel back in time to 1976, what advice would you give yourself?
I think I followed my map pretty well in the course of my life.... To be honest with you, I don't think I gave myself any advice. I think I just kind of got on with what I was doing and thoroughly enjoyed it. Obviously, my best beautiful days were when we were the Buckingham-Nicks Fleetwood Mac version. That was the best to me.

You were seen by many as the calm and the reasonable person in the eye of the hurricane that was Fleetwood Mac.
That is apparently true, but I didn't realise that at the time. Yes, I was supposedly like the Mother Teresa who would hang out with everybody or just try and [keep] everything nice and cool and relaxed. But they were great people; they were great friends.

What sort of toll did that take on you emotionally, to be that Mother Teresa figure?
I don't think I thought about it that much. I enjoyed the storm.... Even though I am quite a peaceful person, I did enjoy that storm. Although it's said that we fought a lot, we actually did spend a lot of our time laughing. So, that must have been forgotten. Great sense of humour.

People spent so much time talking about the Lindsey-Stevie dynamic that they overlooked that you were in the band for nearly five decades with your ex-husband, John McVie. What's that relationship like?
Well, we used to fight occasionally, but not that often. I think we sorted our differences out by then, and we actually got on really well....
It was never as melodramatic as Stevie and Lindsey. And right now, we don't live in the same hemisphere. He lives in LA; I live in London. But we occasionally write to each other or phone each other.... He's been suffering with a few health problems, but he's OK. So we talk a fair bit. He's a good man, John.

You took a 15-year break from the band in the early 00s. How did you grow as a person in that time?
I just enjoyed having my dogs, living in the country, going for long walks. I just wasn't interested in playing music at that point. Then the feeling came back. Mick and I have always been in touch, and he said, "Do you ever think you'll ever come back?" I said, "I don't know." Suffice to say that I did decide to return and never regretted it.

Mick has said he wants to do a farewell tour with the *Rumours* lineup. Do you think that's a pipe dream?
Personally, I'd love to think it could happen. But honestly, I really can't see it happening. I don't know. I've been wrong before.

Mick wants Lindsey back in the band; Lindsey wants to come back. Do you want him back?
I'd always want Lindsey back. He's the best. ANDY GREENE

***Songbird*, McVie's first compilation of her solo work, is out now**

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